GUNS OF OUTPOST MOUNTAIN

WESTERN ACTION

FEB. 1948

15¢

AL CODY'S NEW NOVEL

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

FEB. 1948 WESTERN ACTION BRAND NEW AL CODY NOVEL

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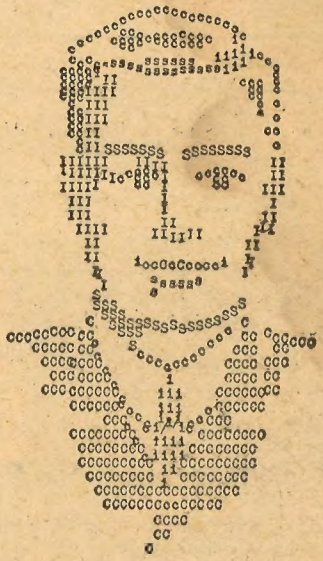

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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 12 February, 1948 Number 3

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

GUNS OF OUTPOST MOUNTAIN ..... By Al Cody 8

It was a clear choice between a hempen necktie and impersonating an unknown girl's dead brother for Clay Nyman, and Clay wasn't sure at first but what he preferred hanging after all. Then Lou Hunter showed up, and Clay decided that living wasn't so bad after all, even as Tod Hunter, Lou's brother. But Clay's continued living was just what Shave McNulty and his side-kicks had decided to put a stop to!

SHORT STORIES

DEVIL-DRIVING' DUDE ..... By Eric Thorstein 67

Driving sick cattle among healthy ones can wreck a herd for sure, but how could driving healthy cattle into Buzz Fleer's herd accomplish the aims Buzz knew Carlin's trail-boss had in mind?

LAWMAN'S PRIDE ..... By T. W. Ford 79

Dusty Joe had to stop Gunner Gass before he broke any laws, but the lawman couldn't use his guns or make an arrest!

TRAIL TO TORMENT ..... By Laurence Donovan 85

Ezra Dume was pretty sure that the Injuns weren't cutting out those valuable horses, but just a hunch couldn't prove anything.

NORTH OUT OF TEXAS ..... By Edward Price 91

It's easy to bluff a gent who figures folks only respond in one way . .

LOCOED GUNSMOKE ..... By Cliff Campbell 95

It was hard to tell who had the crazier ideas, old Lafe Salter or his redheaded daughter!

THE REAL WEST ..... By El Amigo 107

Stagecoach holdups in the old West weren't quite as easy and romantic as today's movies would have you believe!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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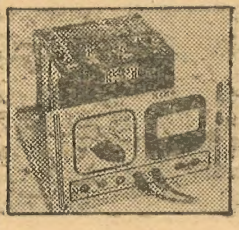

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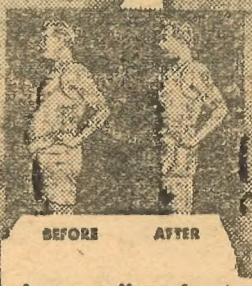

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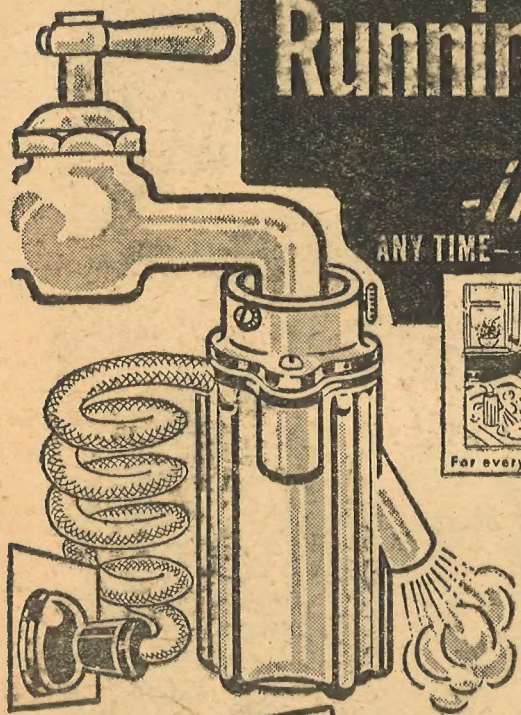

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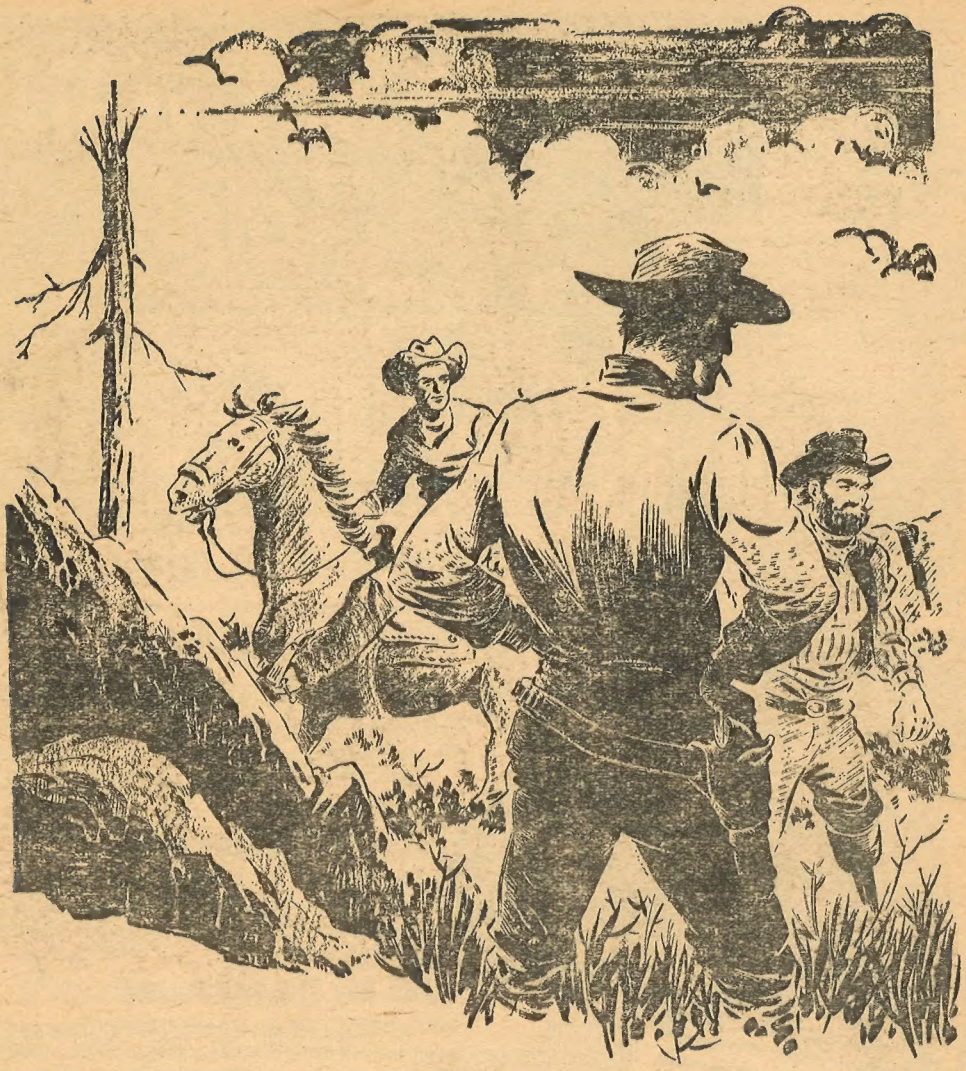

Guns of Outpost

Action-Packed New Book

Clay Nyman's introduction to Five Corners was something that could have been improved upon seeing as how he was about to make the acquaintance of The Tree — a horse-thief's last partner. Then came the proposition that he play the role of an unknown girl's dead brother, play it well enough to convince the girl herself. The gents who made this proposition meant all right, but Clay wasn't sure that maybe he preferred hanging after all!

Mountain

Length Novel

BY AL CODY

(Author of "Dark Canyon"

1

THEY CALLED the camp Five Corners. For, though it now had an alcalde, a position which its possessor had magnified to that of mayor and marshal as well as justice of the peace, Five Corners was still more of a gold camp than a town, here on Outpost Mountain in the high Sierra. There was a veneer over its savagery now, as examplified in the alcalde. But beneath that thin and not-too-polished skin, the camp was essentially the same as it had been at its inception, half a year before—at the episode which had given it its name.

Clay Nyman had heard the story,

though he had never seen the camp until now. Five Corners had been named with its first killing, since only four men could have the corners of their claims come together, and such a matter had had to be settled some way.

The story had it that more sober-minded men of the camp had not liked the solution any to well—which was why they had gotten together and decided to have a little law and order. Out of that, they had chosen Peg-leg Martin as alcalde, and had put it up to him to handle things. Evidently he did pretty well, even if some of his methods were unorthodox. At least, his reputation had penetrated far beyond his local field of activity.

Clay shrugged a little, sweeping the camp with bold, speculative eyes. Maybe that tradition would help him now—though it was just as likely to help him straight to a noose. This California was all a lawless land, and the hot gold fever of '49 had been little tempered by three fabulous years. Then he shrugged.

This was Five Corners. Where he had been brought to die.

Close at hand was The Tree. Clay saw it, with a slight curling of his wide, arrogant mouth, and recognized it. Its reputation had spread as widely as that of the alcalde, or of Five Corners itself.

It had two distinctions. One, in that it was the only cottonwood tree here on the mountain-top, or anywhere for miles around. How it came to be here, no one could say. Yet there it was; a massive thing, standing near the edge of the diggings, with the dignity of age upon it. And, quite frequently, other and more passing burdens.

Near its foot lay a big, fallen pine log, and that, as Clay had heard, was used as a sort of bench where justice might be dispensed when Peg Leg found it necessary to hold court. The Tree had a long, big limb which jutted out, at just the right height to throw a rope over. It was handy, if a man had to be hung; no waste of time or motion.

They were taking him straight to the Tree, Clay saw.

AT LEAST he had reason to be thankful for this delay. Under ordinary circumstances, he had a strong suspicion that they would have hung him without hesitation or waste of time. Some, indeed, among the dozen Circle 7 men who rode with him as a grim guard, had been all for doing that. To them, this was sort of a Roman holiday.

The puzzling thing was that the foreman, whom the others addressed variously as Shave, or McNulty, had vetoed such a swiftly drastic course. Yet it had seemed to the observant Clay that this big, rough-faced man had been more thirsty for his blood than any of the others. That had puzzled him, never having set eyes upon any of them before. Now he thought that he was beginning to understand.

Behind those pale blue eyes of the foreman there might, he guessed, lurk a scheme—though how he could fit into it was still a puzzle. But it had been McNulty who had pointed out to the others that the alcalde might object if they hung anybody without consulting him. There had been shrugs and wry looks, but no more protests.

"Yeah, it is a sight handier to buy whiskey there, than off at Horseshoe Bend or Cottonwood Creek," one of them had agreed. Which would, as Clay figured it, mean a difference of fifty to a hundred miles, since the Circle 7 spread covered half of the western slope of sprawling Outpost Mountain itself.

Already, a crowd was starting to converge toward the Tree, drawn by the magnet of a trial and a probable hanging. A boy, looking not a day older than twelve, his corn-yellow hair in wild disorder, was running, yelling for the absent alcalde.

Most of the gathering miners, too, had the muck of dirt on their boots and trousers, showing that they had but recently clambered out from the holes where they dug like moles. Only one thing was noteworthy—and

that, as Clay had heard, was another claim which Five Corners made to distinction. Nowhere across the whole expanse was there the flash of a woman's skirt.

No woman had ever come to Five Corners. Some had sought to, according to report, but those had not been of a desirable class; and the alcalde was a virtuous man, according to his lights. He had said no, that there would be law and order and decency. And Peg Leg Martin's word was law in Five Corners.

A murmur of expectancy informed Clay that this paragon was coming at last. He turned a little in the saddle, interested. Not only did this man hold life or death in his hands, but he owned one of the richest claims in Five Corners, and was otherwise a personage. Any man who could exercise such powers, in such a camp, had to be.

Outwardly, he did not look it. He was about of Clay's own height, a couple of inches short of six feet. He had a brush of brown whiskers beginning to be sprinkled with gray, like his hair, and both were half a foot in length, and riotous. He chewed tobacco, Clay observed, and it showed. He wore a battered old hat, its color now a thing of conjecture, flat on his head, and shrewd blue eyes peered out from under it. One leg, the right, had been lost above the knee, and he wore a wooden stump in its place, the origin of his name. He walked with a swaying, lurching motion.

And he carried no gun—at least outwardly—which was doubly strange, in a camp where every man went armed. Trebly so, that a man such as this could be alcalde, the law, and his word beyond dispute.

The boy, who had gone shouting for him, was with him now, clutching a tablet in one hand and a pencil stub in the other. He seemed to be steering the alcalde along with one hand on his arm, talking earnestly into his ear the while. And it came to Clay, with faint amusement, that the alcalde, whatever his virtue, was considerably more than half drunk, and that this worried the boy.

A hush had fallen as the alcalde approached. He came up to the log, scarcely glancing toward Clay, and carefully sat himself down, the peg leg thrust straight out before him. Others made way respectfully. The boy was still talking to him, low-toned but earnestly. Shaking his head, Peg-Leg looked around.

"Troubles never come single," he intoned, a faint aggravation in his voice. "If it ain't one thing, it's danged sure to be two of 'em! Yep! Thunderin' powder, but I never heard the like. You be thinkin' sharp, Bub. You got a good head on you. Better'n most of these here growed men. Yep! Mebby we can figger out somethin'. But now we better get this here other business out the way, so we can give our undivided attention to it. Sure will need it. You be thinkin' hard, Bub. This won't take long."

2

WITH THAT rather dire prediction, Peg Leg turned to look around at the crowd. He was brisk and business-like, but obviously good-natured, even if troubled about something.

"Court's in order," he squeaked. "Now what's this all about? Hey? Thunderin' powder, it better be good. Botherin' a man when he's run ragged with problems a'ready. What's it about?"

Shave McNulty, who had an Irish name but had obviously never been closer than a grandfather to the emerald isle, swaggered forward now, his reddish hair gleaming in the sun, heavy eyebrows craggy, but face whiskerless beneath.

"We caught this man with his horse here, your honor," McNulty explained. "A Circle 7 horse, you'll note. Claimed he'd bought it—but Circle 7 horses are never sold! We didn't want to string him up, though, without givin' you a chance to hold court about it. So we brung him here."

"And a danged good thing you did, Shave McNulty!" Peg Leg bristled.

"There's been too much of this lawless hangin' going on around the country; I won't have it! If you hadn't brung him here, nary a one of you Circle 7 boys could buy a drink in Five Corners till snow flies again. Talkin' of flies, ain't the danged critters a pest!"

He slapped viciously at one, and turned, for the first time, to look squarely at Clay. The boy, who had been busily writing in his tablet, looked at him as well, and a startled, almost bewildered expression overspread his face. He plucked urgently at Peg Leg's sleeve, and whispered in his ear.

"Hey?" Peg Leg listened, stared in disbelief, and swung back for another look at Clay.

"Help him down off'n that cayuse," he barked. "What's he kept up there for?" Disdaining any aid, Clay swung gracefully down from the saddle, despite his bound hands, and crossed to stand in front of the log; the two, judge and boy, eyed him with a fixed intensity that was rather bewildering, and in silence.

Clay returned the gaze, head thrown back, no whit discomposed. He had lost his hat several miles back, and stood bareheaded, his red-brown hair a little long but silky, slightly curling. He was lean-jawed, closely shaven only that morning, and his eyes, so dark blue as to appear black, held no emotion. He was lean-hipped, deeply tanned, and appeared the least concerned in these proceedings of any man there.

"Untie his hands!" the alcalde barked suddenly. "Thunderin' powder, give a man a chance to scratch!"

While a couple of the others hastened to obey, the boy sprang up and ran to the creek. He was back a moment later with a tin cup brimming with water, which he extended in silence. Clay took it, and, bringing his stiffened arms around in front of him with an effort, gave a short, grave bow.

"Thanks, Bub," he said.

The boy's face flushed a little, and he returned to the log; again, while the others watched in bewilderment and McNulty scowled impatiently, he and the judge whispered, in obviously mounting excitement. Clay caught a few snatches of what they were saying.

"But how you goin' to stop—"the boy asked. And later: "Can't afford to take chan—"

FINALLY, Peg Leg came back to the business in hand.

"Court's still in order," he declared. "We'll see." He fixed his gaze on Clay's accuser. "What's this now? You say you figger he stole this horse?"

"Well, Judge, he's ridin' a stolen one," McNulty repeated. "So, that bein' the case, we brung him here."

"You did right," Peg Leg agreed. "Stealin' horses is just as heinious an offence as drinkin' alone."

"I didn't steal the horse," Clay said, his voice aloof and uninterested. "As I explained at the time, I just showed the bad judgment of buyin' it, figgerin' that I was dealin' with an honest man."

That happened to be the way of it, but it was so old a story that it didn't seem to impress any one very much, any more than it had done at the first telling. But Peg Leg and the boy seemed much interested; the boy whispered in the alcalde's ear again, and McNulty barked an impatient question.

"Is this a law court, or does a mouthy kid count for more than the time of all the rest of us?"

The boy flushed painfully, and Peg Leg bristled.

"Bub's a part of this here co't," he barked. "And when I consult, I consult! Things have come up that have a bearin' on this here case. You say you bought the hoss, eh? Such things do happen, I guess. What's yore name?"

"Nyman. Clay Nyman."

"Clay, heh? Listen. You ain't, by any chance, any relation to a hombre named Tod Hunter, be you?"

"Tod Hunter?" Clay shrugged. "Never heard of him. Did he steal horses?"

"Nope," Peg Leg denied. "Tod, he was one of the first comers to this

here camp, but he got in a dispute about whether whiskey or ale was best. Stood up for ale, which put most everybody else at a disadvantage, them never havin' tasted it. Error of jedgement. Somebody got mad and shot him."

He turned, pointed off some distance to a growing Boot Hill.

"We buried both of them there," he added in dismissal, swung back.

"No relation of this Tod Hunter, eh? But you're the spittin' image of him—size, looks, everything. Eh, boys? Some of you remember Hunter, don't you?"

Though plainly as much at a loss as to what this was all about as Clay himself, the interest of the crowd quickened. Several looked at him more carefully, then nodded.

"Yeah, he sure does look like he might be that hombre's twin—far as I can remember," was the concurrent opinion.

"But what's it all about?" McNulty demanded. "Ain't you going to hang him?"

Peg Leg fastened a reproachful glance on his questioner.

"You be danged careful how you talk to me, Shave McNulty, or I'll have you in contempt of court," he warned. "You can hang a horse-thief any day. Thieves an' what-not are thick as fleas on dogs, these times. But mebby we got a better use for him. Now, listen, every one of you! This concerns this whole camp, same as me."

CLAY FLEXED his muscles and waited. He was as much in the dark as any of the others, as to what this was all about, but it was obvious excitement. And the alcalde seemed to share it to an equal extent. Peg Leg spoke, his voice a little squeaky with that excitement.

"Like the most of you boys know, you went and put me in as alcalde of this here camp, without my approval or consent. And me not bein' able to read or write! But you wanted me to take the job, and, by thunderin' powder, I took it! Though it's more of a headache than I ever figgered it could be, at that! If 't wasn't for Bub, here, to read my mail and keep court records and that sort of thing, danged if I wouldn't be up a stump! Bub, he's got a man's head on his shoulders—better'n most of you!"

He cast an affectionate glance at the boy, swung back.

"He just got a letter, just 'fore you sons brought this Clay Nyman in here. Shorty, he packed himse'f in a load of stuff from Baldy, and brung it along. And for the rest of you that's so mighty anxious to get mail, that was the only mail Shorty did bring. Somebody there remembered about it, bein' addressed to me here as alcalde. Reckon it'd been layin' around quite a spell, at that.

Clay, watching, could see the flicker of hope that had been on other faces, die out again at this news. Mail was a scarce article in such a new, remote camp as this one high on Outpost Mountain.

"Well, this letter's been plenty long in gettin' here," Peg Leg continued. "But do ye know what it is? It's from the sister of this here Tod Hunter, that we was just talkin' about. Seems he'd wrote her from here, sayin' he had a claim, and was aimin' to stay put here a spell—which he shore has!"

He extracted a soiled blue bandana from a pocket, blew his nose like a trumpet, and went on.

"So she writes to me that she ain't heard nothin' more from him—bein' a Easterner, 'course she don't know how lucky she was to get a letter a-tall! She says this Tod, her brother, left his home back east, about three years ago. And that till this letter, they hadn't heard from him for more'n a year. Meanin' his ma, and her wrote the letter. How was the last part of that writin', Bub?"

"Why, she says that she has to see him, that their ma has died, and she needs him to settle up the estate," Bub explained. "Mighty important to her, I guess. So, not gettin' any more word, she's comin' here, to find him. And she wants you, as alcalde, to help her."

Peg Leg nodded.

"She kind of goes on to tell where she's writin' from, and sort of tracin' her route out. How long it'll take. Course, there ain't rightly no tellin' about that. But the way Bub figgers it, she's apt to be showin' up here any time now, lookin' for her brother—might even arrive today!"

He paused, enjoying the sensation he had created. For that it was a sensation, Clay could readily appreciate. The mere fact of any woman planning to come to Five Corners would have been enough for that. And in view of the other factors already revealed—Clay found himself listening as tensely as any of the others.

"Sure had me stumped, when Bub told me that," the alcalde confessed. "Fact is, I was plumb flabbergasted. It ain't no ordinary case, you can see that. She sounds like one of these here determined females, and besides, she's got rights. Can't just stop her, roole or no roole."

DEAD SILENCE held for a dragging moment, as the others digested this. Then Peg Leg nodded.

"So you see how it is? I ain't a sentimental man, but I'll have to admit that, in the few days I saw of him, I liked this Tod Hunter, this brother of her's. Even if he ws a half-baked tenderfoot. And now this sister, comin' way out here to find him—and her just a kid, it seems, when he left home. And havin' just lost her ma in the bargain. Why thunderin' powder, I'd rather be shot than to have to tell her that he's buried off there, after her doin' all that. And besides—once she gets here—what we going to do with a woman in camp?"

Clay felt almost inclined to laugh at the seriousness with which these rough, bearded man pondered this problem, but they were in deadly earnest. The possible advent of a woman into their midst was far more staggering than the matter of hanging a man.

He had grown tired of standing. So he seated himself, back to the Tree, and fell to whistling *Old Folks at Home*, under his breath. No one paid any attention to him.

"That's the size of it," the alcalde went on, lowering his voice. "And I'll admit I was sure up a stump till Bub here, give me the idea. Like you've all admitted, Clay sure looks to be the spittin' image of this Tod Hunter."

Clay sat up, a little startled as he began to get the possible implications of the thing. Peg Leg swung on him now, wooden peg outthrust like a pointing finger.

"You've heard this too," he said. "Mebby you're a horse thief, and mebby you ain't. We could hang you, which might be a good thing for the country. Or we could banish you, which might be a bad thing for the rest of California. But I ain't fixin' to do neither one—not today, leastways!"

"You don't, by any chance, intend to set me free?" Clay asked, and managed to make his voice sound uninterested.

"Yes and no," Peg Leg nodded. "If you do a good job at what we got for you to do, you go free. But if you botch it, anywhere along the line, we hang you then, without no more foolin'. What do you think of that?"

"If it's what I think you've got in mind, I'm not sure but what I'd prefer hangin'," Clay said tersely. "But go on. Let's hear it."

"Quick ain't you?" Peg Leg nodded approvingly. "Well, like we've said plenty already, you look enough like this Tod Hunter to be his twin. And since, as Bub has p'inted out, this sister of his'n was just a kid when he left home, and it's been three years since she saw him, seems like you'd ought to be able to pass yorese'f off as him. Any changes, she'll put down to three years of knockin' around the country."

Clay blinked. Otherwise his face did not change. It struck him as an utterly fantastic proposition, but he could not see that the miners, at least, were solidly behind their alcalde. Even his late captors seemed in no mood to protest.

"When she gets here, you'll play the part of her brother," Peg Leg went on. "And fix things up for her

to get that property, or whatever it is. And you'll be a mighty good brother, don't forget that! We'll all be watchin' you! You make it stick, till she's satisfied, then you can pull out ag'in, and go free. But you make a boggle anywhere, and we hang you, then and there!"

Clay considered this a minute, standing now, back to the big Tree, still whistling softly between his teeth. Then he shrugged.

"I don't know but what hangin' would be the easiest way out of it," he commented. "But I am by nature, I hope, a gentleman. The orders of the court shall be obeyed."

3

AS BETWEEN wearing a hemp necktie, or playing brother to a maiden in distress, it seemed the sensible choice to Clay. Or so it had seemed at first. The more he considered it the more dubious he became; hanging at least would be quicker, and perhaps less painful in the end.

For, as he discovered from a perusal of the letter and a few questions, little was known here about Tod Hunter, and even less concerning his sister. She wrote a round, neat, and firm hand, and she signed herself Louise Hunter; but that left a lot of questions to be answered.

"I'm willing to take your word for it, Peg Leg, that I look a lot like this Tod," Clay said patiently. "Maybe enough to pass for him, after three years. But for how long? This reminds me of a family reunion, without the family. Say she gets here, all right, and finds me. She rushes up and throws her arms around me." He colored a little at the thought. "In that case, I'd have to give her a warm brotherly kiss. You can see it won't do."

"Why not?" demanded the alcalde, sharply. "What's so bad about kissin' a pretty girl?"

"Nothing, I suppose," Clay confessed. "But I'm not used to it. She'll likely guess, first thing, that I'm a fraud. And even if we pass that first test, think of all the hurdles remainin'!"

"Thunderin' powder, but it's a plumb miracle!" Peg Leg marveled. "Hurdles remainin', he says! Why, you even talk just like he did—sort of high-faultin'. Don't he, Bub?"

"Sure does," Bub agreed admiringly. "If I didn't know you was buried over there—I mean that he is—" he stopped in confusion.

"The point," Clay went on. "Is that, after the first few minutes, when we'll have passed the time of day and so on, is that we'll naturally want to talk about home—about all the things that we're supposed to know about together. Or she will and I should. But how can I? Why, I don't even know how old I'm supposed to be."

"Golly, I remember now," Bub exclaimed excitedly. "I heard Tod tell some others that he was twenty-three, on the 23rd of March. And that he was from New Jersey. Things was pretty new here, then—I'd just come in, with Uncle Ty. There was a lot of snow, up here, so you could hardly get up the trail. And it was cold! He was comparin' it to a Jersey winter, and sayin' it was his birthday."

"Well, those are two definite points to go on," Clay conceded. "But what'll I do when she starts talking about old friends? Or relatives that I'm supposed to know about?" He studied the letter again, and shrugged.

"She has character, this sister Lou of mine. Sure writes a beautiful hand. And anybody who's comin' clear out to this country, by herself, lookin' for a lost brother—if she gets here, she won't be the sort to have the wool pulled over her eyes. Looks to me like you spoiled a perfectly good lynchin' party, Peg Leg."

HE COULD see that Peg Leg was beginning to think so too, now that his first enthusiam had cooled. And the alcalde's frankness was disconcerting.

"That can be remedied, if you don't do a good job!" he warned.

"There's another angle you seem to

have overlooked," Clay pointed out. "Since I'm supposed to have been livin' here for several months, where do I live? And what do I do? There must be some reason why I've stuck around here for so long."

Peg Leg grunted.

"Reckon that's so," he agreed. "Must be you've got a claim—and a place to live. Le'see, now. I got it. Jim Doolin took over Tod's claim, after we buried him—I remember it plain. And he finished up the shack Tod had started. That ought to belong to you, anyway. That'll make it all right."

"But what about Doolin?" Clay asked. "Isn't he apt to object?"

"Nope. Trouble with Jim was, he et his own cookin'. Didn't have a strong enough stomach for it. We buried the pore feller here a couple days ago. Bein' as the claim wasn't worth much anyway, nobody's bothered to take it over. Bub 'll show you where it is."

"A house and claim eh? What's the shack like?"

"We-el, it's not a bad one—course, it needs cleanin' up some. Special as she'll likely spend a night or so in it, 'fore we can get her out of town ag'in. You can be doin' that cleanin' now. Course, you'll have to bunk outside—and we'll be watchin' you!"

"Don't worry," Clay said grimly. "My conduct will be entirely brotherly. I promise you that. You seem pretty certain that she'll really get here."

"Figger she's apt to," Peg Leg agreed. "Have to be ready for the worst. Wimmin are plumb dangerous, never can tell what they'll do. Give me wild hosses, any time. Thunderin' powder, we been havin' a peaceful camp here. No wimmin. None allowed. But with her brother kilt, what can you do? It'll be up to you to get her out of here, quick as ever you can, mind!" he added warningly.

Clay shrugged.

"There's one other point," he said. "I bought that horse, whatever McNulty says. Paid cash for it. Do I get to keep it?"

"Now we're back ag'in to that," Peg Leg sighed "Ain't we got trouble enough, as 'tis? But might's well go whole hawg." He raised his voice, to where the Circle 7 crew were about to leave camp, after having visited the saloon, taking the horse with them.

"He gets the hawss,' Peg Leg said. "Leave him here."

"That horse was stolen, and we're keepin' it," he said shortly.

"You're leavin' it," Peg Leg retorted promptly, and now he seemed to take on a new dignity and stature. "You ain't arguin' with me, Shave McNulty—or be ye?"

McNulty hesitated. But here on the mountain, with the miners all around, was no time for such an argument, and he knew it. Reluctantly he dropped the reins of the cayuse.

"You're gettin' pretty high-handed, Peg Leg," he said flatly. "Don't ride your luck too hard!"

"I'll spur when I'm a mind to," the alcalde warned, and watched the Circle 7 ride on out of sight, then shook his head.

"Makes things clear," he growled. "I wouldn't put it beyond McNulty to've framed the whole business, anyway, considerin' you as a tenderfoot an' fair game. He's first cousin to a polecat, anyway—meanin' no disrespect to the four-laigged skunk!"

WITH BUB for a guide, eager and excited about the whole thing, Clay began a tour of inspection. They went first to the cabin of the late but unlamented Jim Doolin, and Clay was agreeably surprised. It was a two-room affair, well built, and with better accomodations than most. Doolin's housekeeping had not been his strong point, but an hour or so of cleaning and discarding various odds and ends would largely remedy that. Clay set to work, Bub helping him.

"Here's a can o' corn," Bub said, wrinkling his nose at it, where it stood, a third full, the lid removed and swarming with flies. "Guess it's kinda sour too. Better throw it out, eh?"

"Yes, I think I'd prefer hangin',

as a quicker and less painful end," Clay agreed. "It's probably what killed him—leaving it standin' after it was open, then eating some more of it."

"Golly, is that it?" Bub gasped. "I got some stuff over at my shack I'd better toss out, too."

Bub, it developed, lived with his uncle, Ty Turner, who freighted supplies in to camp via mule back, and was accordingly absent most of the time. But Bub was a general favorite, not alone with the alcalde, but with everyone in Five Corners. Clay could understand that. He was eager, a whirlwind of industry. With the cabin in some semblance of order, and the door and window open to the sunshine, they went outside again.

"Where to now?" Bub asked. "Want to see your claim?"

"Might as well, I suppose," Clay sighed, and looked meditatively at the hole in the ground where Jim Doolin had grubbed like a mole. Tod Hunter, the original owner, might have had high hopes of it, but they had apparently not been realized. The only good thing about it was that it was bordered on one side by the creek.

Doolin's tools were still there, just as he had last dropped them, everything was ready now if he wanted to work. The prospect was not too pleasant.

"If you work hard, you c'n make eight-ten dollars a day," Bub volunteered. "That'll buy grub in this camp. Jim, he told me only last week, that was what he was makin'. Course, it ain't so good as a lot of these claims, but it's fair."

Clay turned away, and Bub followed him, silent for a moment. He looked up with quickening interest as he saw where Clay's steps were leading—to Boot Hill, off on a pleasant slope of the pocket.

"Tod's buried right over here," Bub said, and ran ahead, then stopped at a now weed-grown mound. "Golly," he muttered. "I'd forgot all about that."

"I was wondering about it," Clay nodded, and peered down at the board, on which some one had painted the name of Tod Hunter and the date of his demise—March 27, 1852. It had begun to fade somewhat, as other names were doing here, soon to be lost and forgotten after their one brief moment in the sun. But this was still readily decipherable. Clay stooped, got a hold on the stake, and with a strong heave, had it out.

"There's a chance that she might come looking around here," he explained. "Some folks like to. Can you stick it back, Bub—after we've gone?"

"Sure," Bub agreed. "I'll take it home with me. Reckon he won't miss it for a few days, nohow."

They strolled back toward the cabin again, and suddenly Bub gave a shout.

"There comes Uncle Ty now," he yelled. "See, with that string o' pack mules, an'—golly! Ain't that a woman with him? Bet that's her!"

Clay looked where he pointed, his interest quickening. There were nearly a score of mules, heavily laden, ambling into camp, a lanky, bearded man accompanying them. Usually, Clay judged, he probably rode a saddle horse, but that pony was occupied now by a young woman who seemed perfectly at home in the saddle. And she must, he knew, seeing the rich brown hair, with just a hint of rich auburn in it, be Louise Hunter. Which, he realized, put it up to him. A brother should be eager in welcoming a sister.

He took a deep breath and started, Bub beside him. It needed only a glance to show that she was pretty, and, as he had already decided, a person of character. He felt a coldness which had not been there, even when the crew of Circle 7 had swooped down on him and threatened to lynch him—a coldness coupled with warm excitement. He wondered wildly what to say, but Bub spared him the need for that, racing on ahead, his own voice shrill with excitement.

"You're Miss Hunter, ain't you?" he shouted. "We just now got your letter, sayin' you'd be comin'. And here's Tod—you sure come to the right place!"

4

IT SPOKE well for Clay's sense of humor that he could smile a little at Bub's enthusiasm. He had an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach, but he managed to keep the smile on his face as he went forward. And now the girl was dismounting, before he could come up to help her, turning to smile at Bub and then looking back at him, half-questioningly, half-expectantly. And in that moment he felt like a fool.

"She's gotten a ride way up here with Bub's uncle," he told himself. *"And of course he's answered her questions and told her that Tod Hunter died a long while ago!"*

It was funny that no one had thought of that, before now. The thing was so obvious. But now the girl was turning to him, and smiling a little, and her lips were red, her cheeks pink, her eyes, like his own, very deeply blue—only, it seemed to him, a warmer blue than his could ever be.

"Tod!" she breathed. Aren't you glad to see me?"

There was nothing to do, then, but to gather her into his arms, and return her kiss, and try to keep his own voice steady in the wonder of it. And somehow he managed it.

"Glad to see you, Lou?" he said. "Do you need to ask that? Only—you're so—so sort of overwhelming now—you've changed—"

"For the better, I hope?" she said demurely, and stood back to look at him. "I was sort of leggy, I guess—but you're just the same. And I have found you."

"Gosh, if I'd only known sooner," he stammered. "But the way letters are—it just got here a little while ago. I wish I'd known, Lou."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Mr. Turner here has been very good, to let me come along with him. He said first that it couldn't be done, and then that he was ag'in it. But when I insisted, he let me come."

"No use argufyin' with a woman," Ty said shortly. "Learned me that a long spell ago." Whatever thoughts might be hidden behind his whiskers, he gave no sign of. "What's for supper, Bub?" he asked.

"Gosh, I haven't had time to think of supper," Bub exclaimed. "Things have been so exciting."

"Um. Shouldn't wonder. Come along, I'm hungry."

He was, Clay could see, a man accustomed to keeping his own counsel. Quite apparently, despite his surface gruffness, he had been smitten by Louise's beauty, and the situation which she found herself in. Sufficiently so to melt and furnish her a horse to ride, and to shrink from the unpleasant task of informing her that her long journey had been in vain. Now, whatever surprise might be in him at these latest developments, he was keeping that to himself, too.

"You're her brother, eh?" he asked of Clay, and his eyes were keen and appraising. "Um. Feller that'd leave a sister that way—um. Well, mind you take good care of her now. Come along, Bub."

"Oh, but Mr. Turner—I want to thank you for being so good to me," Lou exclaimed. "And I haven't paid you—"

"Nothin' to thank me for," he said gruffly. "And nothin' to pay. Wimmin-folks are forbid here in this camp. Want to get me skinned alive for takin' pay for bringin' you here? Nope. You just tagged along. I couldn't stop ye. Not responsible. Not any."

SHAKING HIS head, he turned, placing a hand on Bub's shoulder, and whistling at the mules. They stirred to motion, long ears wagging back and forth as though they knew some amusing secret, and the two followed them. Clay noted that others of the camp had watched the arrival, but they were carefully keeping back out of the way.

"You must be tired," he said. "And hungry. "It's good to see you, Lou."

That, at least, was true. All of it. Ty had dumped a pack off one of the mules, and Clay shouldered it, led the way toward the cabin. This had been

a fantastic day, but pretty soon he'd wake up. It couldn't go on.

"So this is Five Corners!" Lou said, looking around. "What an out of the way, on top of the world place! Mr. Turner said this was called Outpost Mountain! It's a whole world apart, isn't it? But I can see why you liked it. You must have liked it, to stay here so long!"

"Well, it has things to keep a person," Clay conceded.

At the cabin, being familiar now with the stock of supplies which Jim Doolin had left behind him, Clay made her sit down while he busied himself with cooking supper. He contrived to listen a good deal without saying much. But when he stopped to analyze the conversation, he discovered that he had learned very little. She talked of their old home, of friends, of her trip west, and how lucky she had been on it, making good time.

If he had avoided betraying his own ignorance of Tod Hunter's past, he had learned very little about it either, Clay decided. But she gave an exclamation as the meal began.

"At least, you've learned to be a pretty good cook, Tod."

"I can get by, I guess," Clay agreed. "A man has to be able to, in in this country."

"I should think so. But I'll take that over, starting tomorrow. That will make it easier for you."

Clay surveyed her uneasily. His orders on that subject were pretty definite. To get her away from Five Corners again without delay. Women had been taboo in Five Corners. And he had been spared from hanging mostly for the purpose of seeing that the tradition was continued.

But that wasn't all of it, he knew. Bub was a soft-hearted kid, and the alcalde, though he might deny it, was much the same. Likewise, there was chivalry in this camp. Almost to the last man, these rough and ready miners had been touched by the thought of a girl, journeying this far to find her brother, only to discover his grave. They had jumped at the chance of easing that shock, if they could, of furnishing at least a proxy which would help her to get an estate, or whatever it was, properly settled. Remembrance of that gave him an idea.

"You said something in your letter to the alcalde about wanting to find me, to help settle things up," he suggested. "I suppose we shouldn't waste much time."

Lou smiled at him, a little tremulously.

"When I wrote that, I thought that there was some money left," she explained. "You know, we always supposed that Mother had quite a bit put away, from Father's sailing days. But I found out, soon after I'd written, that she had just been a good manager on a little. There's nothing left at all. So, of course, there's nothing to go back for."

"No, I suppose not," he agreed thoughtfully. "I didn't dream it was that way," he added, as an afterthought.

"I know you didn't, Tod. I was lucky, then. Captain Phineas Strong was sailing for Central America, and gave me a free passage down there. We made a quick run, traveled overland to the Pacific without any delays, and Captain Phineas had already arranged for me to come up to San Francisco on another ship, with an old friend of his. That's how I managed to get here so quickly. I couldn't possibly have made it overland in that time, of course.

CLAY HAD been wondering about that, but he had hesitated to ask questions. A seafaring background was interesting to know about.

"So that's the way it is," Lou added. "And since we're together again, and you like it here and have property—you do have a claim here, don't you, Tod?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "Of sorts."

"Well, then I'll keep house for you, and that settles that," she nodded decisively, then, at the look on his face, looked full at him.

"Or don't you want me around, Tod? Is that it?"

"Good Lord, no," Clay protested, and found that he meant it. "Of

course I do—only—well—" he was floundering, wondering what he could say. She smiled at him.

"You sound as if you meant it—wanting me to stay. But what? Is it that this has been a womanless camp, and you're afraid of what the others will say? Why should they care? We're brother and sister, aren't we?"

"I don't care what they think," Clay growled. "You're right, though. There never has been a woman here. But what I'm thinking about is your standpoint—and the winter."

"What about the winter?" she asked. "I've heard tell that the California winters are wonderful."

"That's along the coast, and farther south," Clay explained. "Nobody's ever spent a winter up here yet, on top of old Outpost—but this is late August, and it won't be long, up here, till snow flies again. I have an idea it'll be quite an experience. And things aren't too well organized, for supplies. Things may run short."

"If you and the rest of them can stand it, I can," she assured him. "I think it will be rather fun."

"Maybe. As I say, what I'm tryin' to think of now is such a winter from your point of view—the only woman in a camp of men."

"I think that I'm going to like it here," Lou decided. "I don't wonder that you've stayed in one spot for so long. Are you as lazy as ever, Tod?"

Clay looked at her, startled. Was she a mind-reader, to know of his antipathy for work, or was he more like her brother than he had supposed? Then he grinned and answered truthfully.

"I don't know that I've changed too much, that way," he conceded.

"But you do have a house and a mine—or is it called a claim?" she added. "That's something, anyway. And I suppose you don't have to work to make a living here, do you?"

"I haven't—so far," Clay said glumly, and wondered about the future. She had accepted him, and she was penniless. Which left him with a sister to support. That part was all right, but the notion of grubbing in a hole was something to shudder at. He didn't mind work—not of his own choice. But mining—the idea was nightmarish.

HE ROSE from the table, opened the door. As he had suspected would be the case, most of the camp was now starting to converge on the cabin, with Bub and the alcalde in the lead. And in the intervening time, they had undergone a transformation.

Whiskers and hair had been combed out, often for the first time in weeks. Some had even gone so far as to shave, as cuts and abrasions testified. Newer, cleaner clothes had been put on. Here and there a necktie showed. There were half-sheepish, half-expectant looks on most of the faces. But the advent of a woman in camp was a real event to these companionship-starved men, and, forbidden though Five Corners might be to women in general, tonight they were going to do honor to their guest.

"Folks are coming to meet you," Clay said. "Everybody, by the looks!"

"Why, how nice," Lou exclaimed and came to stand beside him. "And they're all your friends I know. You'll introduce me to everybody, won't you?"

Panic gripped Clay for a moment, then was gone. That solution, at least, was simple.

"I'll get the alcalde to do that" he said. "It's his rightful privilege. Peg Leg is alcalde—but he's more than that. He's the legislative, executive and judicial branch of the government, up here, with a few touches he's added himself."

He introduced Peg Leg as he came forward nodding a little awkwardly and holding out his hand.

"Welcome to Five Corners at the top o' the world, Miss Hunter," the alcalde said. "Thunder, but you're pretty!"

"Thank you, Mr. Martin," Lou said demurely. "You have a beautiful town here."

"Beautiful?" Peg Leg blinked, and turned to look with some surprise. "Well, I guess it ain't too bad," he conceded.

Peg Leg did the honors, then in-

troducing the others one by one. Some of them blushed and stammered awkwardly, others came up and shook hands. Clay observed that Shave McNulty was among those present, though most of his Circle 7 crew had long since departed. And McNulty, as he had already decided, was not at all bashful.

"Sure glad to know you, Miss Hunter," he declared. "And if you get tired of this camp, or want to see what a ranch is like we'd be proud to have you visit on the Circle 7."

"I'm sure that I'm going to like Five Corners," Lou said coolly.

"So'm I, if you stay long," McNulty said boldly. "But what I meant was, these here benighted dirt-diggers have always made it a rule not to allow no women around. If they try to kick you out, there's others have got better sense."

Peg Leg bristled.

"There ain't nary cowboy got any better jedgment than us folks right here in Five Corners," he declared heatedly. "A roole's a roole till it's changed. But that was all changed a spell back; Miss Hunter is sure welcome to stay here in town, just as long as she wants."

Lou flashed him a smile which made the alcalde blink.

"I know now that I'm going to love it, just the same as Tod does," she declared.

BELATEDLY, Peg Leg seemed to remember. A guilty look crossed his face, and, as Lou was talking to others, he spoke to Clay in an aside.

"Thunderin' powder, I plumb forgot," he groaned. "Here we come along, figgerin' mebby you'd sort of appreciate a diversion for a while, this first evenin', and then I go and put my foot in it, plumb square!"

Clay looked him in the eye.

"She tells me that she wants to stay," he said. "There is no estate, as it develops. Now you've made an official pronouncement that she is welcome to stay. Anyway," he added. "I think that she'd stay despite us all, if she took a notion."

The alcalde blinked, then rallied nobly.

"Well, danged if I don't think it'll be a good thing for the camp," he declared. "A woman's a civilizin' inflooence."

"How about me?" Clay demanded. "How long do you think I can carry this off without her getting suspicious? She'll get to talking about something that happened back home, sooner or later, and I'll put *my* foot in it. What about that?"

Peg Leg looked at him. Then he grinned and plucked at his whiskers.

"Mebby," he said. "Though you seem to've made a good start. But I'm willin' to bet a horse again a plug of tobacker that you wouldn't back out of this now if you could—even if there wasn't no rope on the other side!"

5

"I THINK your friend Shave is awfully nice," Lou said suddenly. "You're old friends, aren't you?"

"Not too old," Clay growled, and found Lou laughing at him.

"Why, Tod!" she said, and came and placed her hands on his shoulders, smiling up at him. Her eyes were very blue, her hair had warm rich tones to it, and there was a faintly disturbing fragrance which clung to her and reminded him of the first wild roses to bloom in the spring. "If you weren't my brother, I'd think you were jealous!"

"Maybe I am," Clay said. "When you leave just a kid sister behind, and then she comes into your life again as a beautiful young woman—well, I want a chance to monopolize you for a little while, at least, before any cowpuncher or anybody else goes butting in!"

"You're awfully sweet Tod," she murmured. "You used to be so older-brotherish, but now you're just nice!" She looked around. "Which room do I sleep in?"

"Take your choice," Clay said. "I'm sleeping outside, anyway. I've been

doing it for quite a while. I like it outside, under the stars."

"I should think it would be nice, when it wasn't raining or something," she agreed, and Clay cast an uneasy glance at the sky. The stars were out now, but if he knew anything about this country, there was likely, at this elevation, to be a shower before morning.

"If it rains or anything, you come right in," Lou added. "I'll be in the next room, I think. Good night, Tod."

She kissed him, and Clay returned it as matter-of-factly as possible, then took up a blanket and went outside. He had told only the truth, when saying that he had been sleeping out of doors mostly for some time. But that was at a lower and warmer altitude.

Right now, though, he was far from sleepy. Thoughtfully, he set to work, with a few old boards which had been piled here—rough crude ones, chopped out of logs with an axe or adze. Presently he had a lean-to which would keep him dry in any reasonable shower.

He lay awake for a while, trying to plan a course which would keep him from blundering, but it was hard to plan on anything, or to think clearly with the memory of her in his mind. Finally he slept.

A jarring crash of thunder awoke him, followed by the drum of rain on the boards above his head. Almost at once there was water all around him, on both sides, drenching through cracks, washing in a stream under him. It wasn't just raining. It was coming down in bucketfuls, and the roar of thunder, the flash of lightning, ws a continuous barrage.

The door opened, and he saw Lou outlined in a flash of lightning, heard her calling for him to come in.

Clay hesitated only a moment, then crawled out and made a dash for it. He was already soaked but shelter was desirable thing. Lou had a candle lit by now, and she looked at him, half-laughing, half concerned. Standing there in her night shift, she was, it seemed to Clay, the most beautiful thing that he had ever seen.

"You poor boy!" she said. "Why didn't you come in sooner?"

Clay shook his head ruefully.

"It came all at once," he said. "I woke up, and by then it was pouring. Then you called."

"Well, I'm sorry that you got wet, but I'm glad you're in here, anyway," ing terror in her eyes. "This thunder terrifies me. It—it seems to be all around us, and under us at the same time."

Clay knew what she meant. Here, a mile up in the clouds, the storm was not above them, but around and below them. They were wrapped in the twisting heart of it. They talked for a few minutes, until the mutter of thunder had pretty well died away, and the rain had subsided to a gentle downpour. From outside came the fresh, earthy fragrance of new-washed ground, with the rich aroma of evergreens spicing it. Lou stood for a few moments in the open doorway, breathing it in, while the leaves dripped pleasantly. Then she went back into the next room and shut the door but almost immediately tapped on it and reopened it, to stick her head back through.

"Good night, Tod," she said softly. "This—this is the first night in a long while that I haven't felt all sort of lost! And alone!"

She closed the door again, and Clay crawled into bunk which until so recently had been the property of Jim Doolin. He had a half-asleep thought that if Jimmy could see the use which his cabin was being put to now, and who is sheltered, he would be comforted.

MORNING sunshine streaming in at the single window awoke him, and he dressed hastily, hearing Lou stirring around in the next room. It gave him a strange feeling, which he had been stranger to for the last few hectic years. As though he to had come home again. He called out cheerfully.

"Good morning, Lou. Have a good sleep?"

"Fine," Lou retorted promptly. "Can I come out now?"

"Come right ahead," Clay agreed.

"I'm going out and rustle up some dry wood—if I can find any—to cook breakfast on."

She came out, smiling, and he hesitated, then crossed to her for a good-morning, brotherly kiss. She stuck her head out the door and breathed in the winy sharp air. The earth had a washed fresh appearance, but at this altitude, even in summer, there were patches of white frost on the ground in the shaded places, where the clearing air had laid a cold hand.

"I don't wonder that you've kind of taken root and stayed here so long, Tod," she said. "It's glorious! I don't know what I've have done, if you had moved on again. Even with all the kindness what everybody showed me, I—I was just about down to my last dollar!"

"It certainly wasn't fair to you, not to write more, or send you any money, or anything," Clay said heatedly, and then reflected, a little guiltily, that you could scarcely blame a dead man for such ommissions. But Lou shook her head and smiled again.

"Since it's led us both to this place, and to each other again, I'm rather glad it has turned out this way," she said. "Don't blame yourself. You rustle up that wood, and I'll see about cooking breakfast. As good a cook as you are, you're going to be relieved of that chore from now on."

Clay went outside, catching up the axe as he did so. A riot of thoughts were in his mind, and he drove them away with physical action.

A VOICE hailed, and he turned to see Peg Leg Martin hobbling and lurching toward him, making a worse job of it than usual with his peg in the mud. The alcalde's face was sober, this morning, and so was he. He jerked his head and lowered his voice confidentially.

"How you comin'?" he demanded.

"Not bad, so far," Clay admitted. "Though the rain kind of put a damper on things."

"That's what I wanted to talk to ye about. Thunderin' powder, you wasn't suppose to sleep in the same house. Knew that, didn't ye?"

Clay looked him in the eye, coldly.

"I was outside, till the rain started," he said. "And then she called for me to come in. There are two rooms, remember; and I'm supposed to be her brother."

Peg Leg sighed, boring small holes in the mud with his wooden peg. Then he nodded.

"Guess you didn't have no choice in the matter," he conceded. "But the men in this camp can get danged jealous in a hurry. Watch yore step!"

"I'm playing the part of her brother, and doing it just as I'd want to act toward my own sister, if I had one," Clay snapped. "And beyond that, you and the whole camp can go plumb to the devil!"

Abruptly, the alcalde beamed.

"Reckon you're no hawss-thief, son," he said. "Some of them'll kick—they'd do that if they was goin' to be hung. But by golly, I'm for you!"

Nodding, he turned and lurched back toward his own cabin. Clay picked up the wood, feeling warmed. He was beginning to see why Peg Leg was able to exercise so absolute and unquestioned an authority here in such a rough camp. He administered justice with a firm hand, but it was justice, and under-laid with mercy and understanding.

Breakfast was, he admitted the best meal he had enjoyed in years. He ate, and pushed back his chair with a sigh.

"Lou," he said. "That reminds me of home. Like Ma used to cook."

She gave him a sharp look, but made no other comment.

"The larder's low," she said. "You'd better lay in some more supplies. I'll give you a list."

"Fine. I'll take it over to the store now." Clay offered. "Too wet to work this mornin', anyway."

He eyed the list a little ruefully, once he was alone, and calculated that he could just about pay for it. If he put it up Peg Leg, of course this camp was rather responsible for the support of Lou—it had been their idea in the first place. But he had no intention of making any such suggestion. He could handle that end

of it himself, one way or another.

The Mercantile was well filled this morning, and everybody was anxious for mail. Two or three, long overdue, had arrived with a shipment of goods which another freighter had brought, mostly by burro-back.

Now, everybody was querlously demanding mail, complaining that there should be some for them. One man pounded on the counter with a big, horny fist.

"It's an outrage!" he shouted. "What does the gov'ment back there in Washington think we are, anyway? Step-children? Just because we're way off here, on top o' the world, ain't no tarnal reason why we can't even get mail, now an' then! Look at me—Jed Billings! I been here ever since this camp started, by gosh! Dug ten thousand dollars in gold outa the ground, but have I got a letter? Not a danged piece of mail since I been here! Why, this here mail service would make a jackass choke on his own brayin' if he heard about it!"

CLAY managed to pay for what he needed, and was just starting out the door when spurs jingled and Shave McNulty fell into step beside him.

The big, red-headed boss of Circle 7 was freshly shaved this morning, but the effect was somewhat spoiled by the scowl on his face.

"Feller," he said ominously. "I ain't so sure that I like some of the things I'm hearin'."

"No?" Clay shrugged. "I hate to agree with you, but it makes two of us."

Red to match his hair surged in McNulty's face, and he spun around to plant himself in front of Clay, head thrust forward.

"I figger I sorter got her into this —though I sure didn't plan it that way, grabbin' a horse-thief," McNulty growled. "But since it's happened, I'm takin' a interest in that girl. This idea that I been hearin' about you kissin' her—an'—and all—" he was breathing heavily.

"That happens to be my business—as her brother," Clay retorted, and his eyes were level and chill, slightly mocking. "And if you don't like it—what are you going to do about it?"

McNulty hesitated, the veins standing out on his forehead, big fists clenching. Then, seeming to remember that this was Five Corners and not Circle 7, and that his crew were not behind him now, he controlled himself.

"I'd like to wipe up the street with you," he gritted. "But I aim to come callin'—on yore *sister*—and with you just a long-lost new-found *brother*, mebby I better not—right now. But if you keep on rilin' me, feller, next time I won't bother to bring yuh to this numbskull alcalde for hangin'. We can tend to that chore mighty fine on the Circle 7!"

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CLAY SET down his pack. It might as well be now as later, he realized, and though, with Lou in mind, he would have preferred to have it later, it looked like a chore that couldn't be put off.

"I'm not a horse-thief," he said coldly. "I've been thinkin' that over, and I've a few ideas on how come I got to buy a horse with the Circle 7 on it—and for a good price! Then got jumped mighty sudden afterward for stealin' it! If you're lookin' for trouble, McNulty, I can give you all you want, right now!"

McNulty appeared willing to accommodate him. But it was at that juncture that Peg Leg popped out from around the corner of the Mercantile, rather like a hobbling weasel in a hurry.

"I heard what ye said, McNulty!" he said, and his voice was almost squeaky with rage. "You hands on Circle 7 start overlookin' the law here at Five Corners, and ye'll danged soon see that the law ain't no idle brag! Put that in yore pipe an' chew it!"

McNulty glared, then the defiance went out of him. Plainly, the alcalde inspired awe.

"I was just talkin'," McNulty

said. "Won't be no trouble with the Circle 7, 'less somebody else starts it."

"There better not be," Peg Leg warned. "And you talk too thunderin' much. Numbskull alcalde! I've half a notion to have ye up for contempt o' court!"

They glared at each other for a moment, then, shrugging, McNulty turned on his heel and strode away. Peg Leg turned to Clay.

"He's pisen," he warned. "Watch yore step, son! A spell back, that Circle 7 kicked over the traces, and I closed down on them buyin' a drap of likker in Five Corners for two months. That hit harder'n anything else could, and they've behaved—but it ain't no deep-seated cure."

Clay could believe that. He went on home, to find Lou busily at work, cleaning house, singing as she worked.

"I don't want to upset things too much, from the way you've had them, Tod," she said. "But I did think that a few changes could be made. And I have to have something to do."

"Go as far as you like," Clay offered. "That will suit me fine."

He watched for a little while, then, feeling lazy to watch her work, went over to the claim which both Tod Hunter and Jim Doolin had claimed as their own. It was muddy and not at all inviting, but, with a sigh, he dropped into the hole, took up the shovel and set to work.

Within half an hour, he was dirtier than he had been for years, his hands already starting to blister from swinging a pick and lifting a shovel It was hard work, and he knew that he was awkward at it. Then he looked up to see Bub grinning down at him.

"Never did much of that sort of work, did you?" the boy asked. "You sure don't seem to savvy it. Here, let me show you."

HE DROPPED down beside Clay, and set to work. His own hands were calloused, and it was plain that he had profited by watching the other miners of the camp. Presently he pointed out a pile which would be worth washing, and they moved down to the creek and set to work with the rocker which had been built there. And again it was Bub who was the instructor, Clay the pupil.

"Here's gold," Bub said helpfully, and held up a small speck on the point of his thumb nail. "More color, here, too. Course, this claim ain't much good. Everybody said that, and Jim Doolin, he figured the same. But you can make a livin', by workin' hard."

"What a way to make a living!" Clay said disgustedly. "I suppose it's all right for those who like it, but it would never appeal to me."

"Gosh, you talk like a school teacher," Bub said wistfully. "Sure wish I knew how. I did learn to read an' write a little, and I can figger some, but that ain't much."

Clay stood up resolutely.

"You come along with me, Bub," he said. "We're going over and talk to Lou. You'll like that, won't you?"

"Like it? Who wouldn't? Golly, you—you're sure lucky, playin' as her brother, and all. She's—she's like an angel, just about—"

"Bub," Clay said soberly. "That expresses it exactly. She is like an angel. And I figure you're just about next, in this camp. Being a boy—the only youngster around. She'll like you, too."

"Golly, I—I hope so." Bub eyed Clay thoughtfully. "Some of you men are kind of growlin'—about you gettin' to play the part of her brother, and all. But I reckon they ain't got nothin' to worry about. You'd sure treat her just as fine as if she was your sister, I bet—even if there wasn't another person in a hundred miles around."

"I'd sooner cut off my right hand than spoil her faith in me," Clay agreed, and they went on in silence. At the cabin, Lou greeted them, smiling a little at Clay's appearance.

"I never saw you so dirty," she said. "But mud will wash off. And dinner's about ready. For all three of us."

"Golly," Bub breathed. "I—I never dreamed of that."

"I brought him here for a reason," Clay said, without preamble. "He had

nobody of his own age to play with, no chance to go to school—and he wants to get an education. You'll not be too busy with this place. I thought maybe you could work it out to teach him a few things that he should know."

Bub's eyes gleamed, and Lou smiled at him.

"That will be fun," she agreed. "Would you really like it, Bub?"

"Would I ?" He was almost speechless. "Golly, I—I'll do anything you say—if you only will!"

"Then it's settled. We'll have the first lesson, this afternoon!"

CLAY RETURNED to the cabin, finally, to find a Circle 7 cayuse tied near by, and Shave McNulty just taking his leave. Lou was smiling at him, and a quick stab of jealousy rankled in Clay. McNulty turned to wave at her again as he swung into the saddle.

"I'll be comin' back, 'fore long," he said. "Sure looks like I'd have a lot of business in Five Corners."

During that evening, as he had expected, several of the men of the camp came calling, but in a group. So far, no one had betrayed the situation by any incautious remark.

He was lying dreamily on his back in the grass, when Lou found him.

"Working hard, Tod?" she said.

Clay sat up, a little guiltily, then grinned.

"No," he said, and stood up with decision. "Or rather, the answer is yes. Mental work. I'm through with this sort of thing. There's easier and better payin' jobs that are more to my liking."

"Yes?" she asked, and he saw lively interest in her face now.

"Come on," he said. "And I'll show you. I'm creatin' a new job—for this camp, at any rate."

The idea had just come to him, but it held big possibilities, and his excitement was mounting as he considered them. Off at the Mercantile, a considerable crowd was collecting again, attracted by the arrival of some one from "down below." And the hope, he knew, that there might be chance, be some mail arriving. That hope was urgent enough with most of these lonely men, long months or years out of contact with family and friends, to cause them to drop their work and almost run for the store when even the possibility came in sight.

AS HE HAD expected, they had learned by now that there was no mail, and they were milling about, not quite ready yet to break up and return to work, growling as they had done the day before. Jed Billings was making a speech, in the tenor of his remarks of the day before, and receiving respectful confirmation.

Eyes turned to the newcomer as Clay pushed up to stand beside Billings. He raised his voice a little.

"Seems to me," he said. "That it's time something was done about this. And I aim to do somethin' about it. As I figure it, if you boys do have mail comin' to you, it's most likely piled up and waitin', either at Cottonwood Creek, or Baldy. How about it?"

The two towns were eighty and a hundred and seventeen miles distant from Five Corners—but at two rather divergent points of the compass, and on different trails.

"Reckon that's about it," Billings agreed. "Though if the gov'ment had any mail service worth anything a-tall—"

"That's it," Clay cut it. "It don't—not around here. Well, I'm going to do something about it. I'm startin' for those two towns, first thing in the morning. I figure it'll take about a week for the round trip. Everybody that wants me to ask for his mail at both places, give me his name, and a dollar's worth of dust, and I'll have it down from then on my list. Every letter that comes along, I'll bring in, for another dollar, that you can pay me when I get here. I'll make the trip every week or so, and any mail that comes that far, you'll get regular from now on."

There was a moment of silence. Then such a hum of excitement as he had not heard for a long while. The idea met with instant and complete favor. The two or three outfits,

like Bub's Uncle Ty Turner which freighted supplies in to camp by mule or burro, rarely touched at either of the towns where mail was likely to pile up. Nor had the freighter had time for bothering much with it in any case.

"By grab, that's a notion," Billings said heartily. "Here's my dollar in dust, right now. Put down my name."

"Le's go in the Mercantile where we can weight the dust out, and do this up right," Peg Leg ordered, taking charge. "Reckon everybody here 'll be on yore list, Tod. Come on, now, line up!"

The line formed instantly. For the next hour, Clay and the alcalde were kept busy weighing out gold, while Lou wrote down the names. The list was growing to impressive length. One burly miner pushed forward with an inquiry and three letters in his hand.

"You'll take these out an' mail 'em, won't you?" he asked. "Here's a nugget, worth easy five-ten dollars. That'll pay for it, and the stamps to send 'em on, out there."

"By grab, I got some letters to send, too" Billings remembered. "Regular rate, a dollar goin' out, same as comin' in, eh?"

"Sure," Clay agreed, and made the discovery that there were more men around Five Corners than he had at first thought, many with claims or prospect holes back in the woods, scattered around the mountain, but all eager customers.

When he walked home with Lou, he could see that her eyes were shining at the success of this new business venture. He was in the express business, and the first day's receipt, all in gold, for registration and letters to be sent out, amounted to nearly a thousand dollars.

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"I'M PROUD of you," Lou said softly, once they were inside the cabin. "That was a real idea.

"You have nearly four hundred customers here, and about six hundred letters to take out and mail," Lou went on. "But what about all this money, Ted? You aren't going to leave it here? I'd be almost frightened to have so much around."

"I'll take half of it out, and put it in the bank at Cottonwood Creek," Clay decided. "Likely that will be safer."

"Maybe. But will it be safe for you, carrying so much money?"

He laughed at her then.

"Much? Five hundred or a thousand is chicken-feed in this country. Nobody'll bother me."

But when he left, the next morning, riding the horse he had purchased, with the Circle 7 brand on on it, he was careful to see that his new Colt revolver, which had been returned to him at Peg Leg's orders, was in good working order. There was plenty of wild country in between—and there were some who had no love for him, as he knew now. He didn't aim to be caught off-guard again.

It was eighty miles to Cottonwood Creek, and he figured two days for the trip there, a third to go on to Baldy, with three days for returning to camp. Six in all, under favorable conditions. Bad weather, any unusual handicaps, would take longer. And he'd have to have an extra cayuse or so, if he was to keep it up, allowing a horse to rest between trips, at least.

He paused for a word with Bud and the alcade, before he rode out of town.

"Keep an eye on Lou," he said. "I don't think there's the least danger for her—but keep an eye out, just the same."

"She's the apple of this camp's eye," Peg Leg declared. "We'll sure see that she don't want for nothin'."

He squinted at the sun, looked at Clay again, and nodded.

"By the way, how about carryin' a little express?" he asked. "I've got some gold here that's been collectin', one way and 'nother. 'Bout ten thousand dollars. Like to have you put it in the bank for me, at Cottonwood.

Pay you whatever it's worth, o' course."

Clay looked at him a moment.

"You mean that you're willing to trust me with that amount?" he asked. "How do you know that I wouldn't just keep on riding?"

Peg Leg chuckled.

"With Lou here?" he said. "I figger you'll be back. How about it?"

"I'll give you a receipt," Clay agreed, and did so, stuffing the sacks into his saddle-bags. He was beginning to see the real possibilities of the express business, if he made a regular scheduled run each week.

So far, there had been nothing like his proposed pony express for Five Corners. Ty Turner and one or two othes made a business of freighting in supplies, mostly from Grass Valley or Horseshoe Bend. These were usually received from big jerkline wagons heading on cross-country. The service was slow and costly, and barely adequate to the needs of the camp.

THE CLIMATE was changing as he descended. Down at the foot of the mountain it was almost another world. What would it be like, up there, in winter, he wondered? Getting in and out, running express on schedule, would be a tough job. But he found himself rather pleased at the problems which might arise.

The long slopes of evergreen had given way to the other trees. Half way down the mountain, a trail branched off, leading, as he knew, to Circle 7, off on the slopes of the great mountain. Down below were a few other scattered ranches, some of them small, dating back to Spanish rule and easy peacefulness.

Besides these, there was a lot of country virtually unclaimed. Wayfarers were rare. A little past midday, he met Ty Turner, jogging along with his big mules, heading out to pick up more freight. They were patient animals, these mules, well trained, sure footed. Clay commented on this.

"Some prefer burros," Turner said. "I like mules."

He said little else, but when Clay explained his new express business, nodded and, reaching into a pocket, fished out two silver dollars.

"Might have some letters there, myse'f," he said. "Or mebby even Bub. Never can tell."

He nodded again, and spoke to his mules.

Clay came, in early evening, to a log cabin built and abandoned some time in the past.

SOMETHING had awakened him —something alien to this place. Clay could feel that as he lay there in the dark, tense, straining his eyes against the blackness. Night was heavy now, which meant that the prowling moon which had been abroad when he had gone to bed, had moved on into the empty spaces of the west. There was no sound at all, and that in itself was suspicious. When small night creatures stiffened in fear, something was prowling.

He saw it then—a faintly darker shadow between himself and the one small window, something which moved. Clay felt for his revolver, which he had slipped under the saddle-bags, and the feel of the cold butt was reassuring. He slipped out of the bunk, and a board creaked a little under the release of weight.

As though that had been a signal, the intruder hurled himself at him, lashing out with a club. It was mostly chance, in that blackness, but Clay felt it hit his left shoulder, slash down his arm with a numbing impact. He struck in turn with the clubbed gun, knew that he had found a target as well, heard a hoarse grunt and the thud of the club on the floor.

That meant that he had hit the upraised arm which had held the club, and it was probably about as numb as his own arm now. But now the intruder was feeling for him with big, bear-like, hungry paws, and as Clay struck again, his wrist was gripped and twisted, and the gun fell to the floor.

Then they were locked together, and Clay could tell that he was bat-

tling a big man, with savagery driving him on.

His opponent's intent had been to club him into insensibility while he still slept, of course. Failing in that, he aimed now to beat him down without loss of time. Locked together, he heaved tremendously, intending to swing Clay off his feet. The way in which he was foiled seemed to doubly infuriate him, and Clay felt his hot breath, knew that teeth were trying for a hold on his ear or nose.

Releasing one hand, for now the numbness was leaving his left arm so that it was useful again, Clay grabbed a handful of hair and jerked hard. A howl of anguish rewarded him, and his enemy staggered back.

Giving him no respite, Clay charged in. It was chancy work, here in the dark, hurling himself headlong. If he missed and fell, or rammed into the stove or side of the house, he might knock himself out. But he had a sharpened sense of hearing, the heavy breathing of his opponent guided him, and his outspread hands helped. As he felt them touch, he finished his jump, head lowered, butting like a goat.

He felt it ram into the belly of his opponent, sinking deep, heard the gasping whoosh as the breath went out of the other man and his form seemed to crumple up. He collapsed, there on the floor, and Clay kicked with cold precision, using the flat of his foot.

IN THE DARKNESS he knew that he had miscalculatred. But it was a damaging enough blow, for all that —more than the other man cared for in his present state. He scurried, half on hands and knees, rising up, and reached the door before Clay could stop him. By the time he was outside, under the faint high stars, there was a pound of hoofs, growing to fast gallop and as quickly receding.

It would soon be morning, in any case. Clay built a fire in the stove and cooked his breakfast, and by that time red banners flared all across the east, in herald of the marching sun. It burst through the door as he finished saddling up and returned for his saddle-bags, and in its revealing light he saw what had escaped him before—a dozen or so hairs which he had jerked from the scalp of his opponent.

Long, rusty red hairs.

There could be more than one man in this country with hair of the precise shade, of course. Clay's own hair had a litle red in it, but not of this raw carroty color. And it seemed more than a coincidence, that the one man who hated him most should be red-haired Shave McNulty of the Circle 7.

8

FOR THE past few months now, Ty Turner had been doing very well for himself with his mules.

Putting the profits into more mules, he now had about a score, thus being able to allow sore-footed or galled animals a few days between trips in which to recuperate, and so keeping them always in good shape.

Today, he had secured his usual load. With the profits of this trip, he would be able, he estimated, to acquire four more mules which he had already located. A few more months, and he'd really be building up.

It was a pleasant dream, and sight of Shave McNulty in the road ahead of him was not enough to seriously impair it. Turner had been acquainted with the foreman of Circle 7 for the better part of a year or the worse part, if considered in the light of that acquaintance. For he had very little use for the overbearing boss of Circle 7, who had, Turner knew, taken over an old Spanish rancho from its rightful owner, with very little ceremony or regard for law.

But McNulty was, or had been, nothing more than a minor annoyance to the freighter. Turner was preparing to ride on past, with only a curt nod, when he saw that McNulty was intent on a chat, falling in alongside him, as he rode.

"Nice string of mules you've got here, Ty," the foreman murmured, and Turner wondered why he persist-

ed in the fiction of referring to himself only as foreman of the ranch. Probably because that left a supposedly shadowy owner, and the title was an even more shadowy thing.

"Fact is, I ain't ever seen as fine a bunch anywhere," McNulty added. "Color, size—any way you take 'em."

Turner warmed a little. Praise for himself meant nothing. In fact, it would have made him wary and suspicious. But praise for his mules was something else.

"Not bad," he conceded.

"Seem to keep busy, movin' freight on 'em," McNulty added.

Since that was an obvious fact, Turner merely grunted.

"They tell me in Five Corners that you charge mostly nine cents a pound for freightin' stuff in from Horseshoe Bend," McNulty probed.

Since that was no secret, Turner did not deny it. But he could resent it, and he did.

"What business is it of you'n?" he demanded.

"Just sort of curious," McNulty soothed. "I've been doing some figgerin', myself—price of mules, length of time it takes you to make the round-trip, amount you can haul, cost of livin'. Good profit at nine cents a pound. Wouldn't be very profitable though, below seven would it?"

"Why ask me, if ye know such a'ready?" Turner growled.

"Got a good reason," McNulty informed him, and now there was a mocking edge to his tone. "I'm thinkin' of going into the same business myself—long as there's a good profit in it."

Turner considered this, his face expressionless. Then he nodded.

"Reckon there's no law ag'in it," he conceded. "And there's plenty business, I guess."

"There doesn't need to be enough business for both of us," McNulty said smoothly. "Since I'm intending to buy you out. Your mules and business will give me a nice start, Ty."

TURNER looked at him sharply, then grunted.

"I'm well satisfied, runnin' my *own* business," he said pointedly.

"Maybe. But it will work out better, all around without competion. I intend to handle *all* the freight that goes in to Five Corners—you see," he went on blandly. "I'm takin' a lot of interest in that camp, lately. Since you brought Miss Lou Hunter in there the other day. Rememberin' what a good turn you did the camp, whether you aimed to or not, I'm willin' to buy you out."

"You int'rested just on account of her?" Turner demanded.

"Well—let's say that she is one of my big interests. A married man ought to be more than boss of a bunch of cow punchers. Runnin' a freightin' business would pay big, I figger."

"You ain't married yet," Turner said shortly.

"That will come." For the first time, a touch of the habitual arrogance crept into McNulty's voice. "I'll give you three thousand, cash, for your business and string of mules."

"Three thousand?" Turner looked at him in amazement. "Are you plumb crazy? Mules cost money. I wouldn't take twice that for 'em."

"Freightin' to Five Corners, mules are worth money," McNulty agreed. "But aside from Five Corners, they wouldn't bring so much. Wagons work all right to other places. And most freighters prefer horses for their wagons, not mules. Mebbe they're peculiar, but you know that's the way it is."

Turner merely grunted, and spat.

"Three thousand is my last offer," McNulty added briskly. "If you don't take it, I'll break you."

"Yeah?" Turner knew how to crowd a lot of contempt into the one word.

"Yep. I can get other mules—and burros and horses. And I'll make a price of five cents a pound—four, if I have to, or three. Low enough to get all the business. You can't match my price, nor hold out. Better sell."

Turner surveyed him distastefully but he felt an uneasy qualm.

"Where you goin' to get the money to run a losin' business?" he asked.

"I can swing it," McNulty assured

him, proving to Turner that he was the real owner of Circle 7. "Your worry will be somethin' else. Changed yore mind?"

"You can go plumb to the devil," Turner growled. "I ain't sellin."

McNulty shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he said. "I gave you a chance."

He swung his horse about, galloped away in a stretching fog of dust. Turner rode on, but now his face was bleak. He didn't mind a good fight—

"But the kind he'll put up ain't a fight," he growled. "It's a knife in the back. Just the same—I'll sure give him a run for his money, 'fore he finishes!"

9

CLAY WAS burning with impatience when he came in sight of Five Corners. But his plan to go directly to the cabin which had once belonged to Jim Doolin didn't work out. Some one saw him, and set up a shout. Before he was fairly at the edge of camp a crowd had surrounded him, demanding eagerly to know if he had the mail. More were coming on the run, leaving their claims as the news spread. Word that he indeed had a big package of letters to distribute was running with the speed of a jackrabbit only two jumps ahead of a hungry coyote.

Escorted as he was, there was nothing to do but head for the Mercantile and give out the letters. Seldom had he seen such excitement anywhere. Even the prospect of his own lynching, when he had first come to camp, had not stirred them as this was doing.

He saw the alcalde hobbling along, as excited as any of them. Then Bub racing to join the crowd, and with him, Lou. For a moment he feasted his eyes on her, finding her so much lovelier even than he had remembered. There was excitement flaming in her cheeks today, and she waved at him.

Clay dismounted, untied his saddle-bags, and went inside, with the crowd eagerly on all sides. Peg Leg pushed up beside him, puffing, and then Lou was there too. He squeezed her arm, and there was a sudden, new shyness in her eyes as she looked quickly away. Men were clamoring for mail.

"Take it easy," Clay adjured. "We'll handle this, just as fast as we can. I've got a lot of letters here."

"We'll do this, same as before," Peg Leg said authoratively. "I'll weigh the gold to pay for 'em, Lou'll set it down, and Ted'll give out the letters. Now, get yore dust ready!"

"Here's your receipt fom the bank," Clay said, handing it to Peg Leg. "I think you'll find it all in order."

"Have any trouble?" the alcalde asked sharply.

"Not to speak of. Here's a letter—two of 'em, for Tip Noble. Is he here?"

"You just bet I'm here." Noble, a gangling youth with curly fresh whiskers, pushed forward. He colored a little as he tossed down his poke. "Weigh out five dollars, Peg Leg. I've got three letters here to mail on the next trip out."

It developed that there were a lot of letters to go out, written during the last week, since there was now a prospect of them really getting sent. It took a long time to deliver all the mail and collect the new stack, and with word that the alcalde had sent gold out to the bank, there was a rush among others to ship out gold as well, for banking, for sending on to families at home, or for various purchases.

Working hard, without a pause, it was dusk before the thing was finished. A little staggered, Clay listened to the figures which Lou tabulated. He was to take out nearly nineteen thousand dollars this trip, and several hundred letters. With all the errands that were being entrusted to him, frequently for buying little things which were not available in Five Corners, he would be decidedly busy, if he was to make the trip and hold to his schedule. And his fees already totaled a considerable sum for the new trip.

And this, he knew, was still only a beginning—a sort of test case, of himself. He had satisfied the alcalde,

and that was enough for a lot of them. But if his express company proved honest and trustworthy, it would probably grow like a weed in a garden patch. Here was a virgin field, entirely apart from the heavy freight business, which no one had thought to tap before.

HE SAW THE pride in Lou's eyes, as they walked home together.

"You're certainly making good, Tod," she said. "I—I'm proud of you."

"It took you to wake me up," he said soberly. "There's been chances like this right underfoot, and I didn't see 'em."

"Neither did anybody else," she reminded him. "It's certainly going to keep you busy."

"I don't mind that part of it," he said. "In fact, I like this job. Except that it keeps me away from here most of the time."

She made no reply, and he asked the question which had been plaguing him.

"But I don't suppose you have a chance to get lonesome. You likely have lots of company, eh?"

He saw an unexpected dimple come and go in her cheek.

"Quite a lot," she agreed. "I'm sort of like a monkey on exhibition, I guess, and everybody wants to come and have a look."

"It's nothing like that," Clay protested. "Anybody come more than others?"

"Well—let me see," Loy said thoughtfully. "There's Tip Noble. He's just a boy, really, and I think he's lonesome—"

"Everybody'll think they're lonesome," Clay snorted.

"Why, Tod!" She looked up at him archly. "Anybody would think you were jealous?"

"Why not?" he demanded. "After all, you're supposed to be my sister, not their's. And I hardly get a chance to see you at all."

She flashed him a smile, walked in silence for a moment. Clay broke it.

"Any other—regulars?" he asked.

"We-el—yes. There's the foreman of Circle 7—Mr. McNulty, you know. He comes nearly every evening."

"Every evenin', eh?" Clay drew a sharp breath, and checked it. "You sure it's been every evening—since I left?"

At something in his tone, she looked quickly up at him, her own eyes widening.

"I didn't say every evening," she reminded. "I said nearly every evening." No, he's missed one or two—at least two, I think."

"Could you remember which ones?" Clay persisted. "It's not what you think, maybe—but this is important to me."

"He wasn't here the first two days after you left," Lou said thoughtfully.

CERTAINTY was mounting in Clay now. He had a handful of red hairs, mementoes of that fight in the shack, and there had been little doubt in him from the beginning. The fact that McNulty had missed calling here that first night out, showed that he could have been Clay's assailant.. But being sure of it in his own mind was not proof.

Lou slipped on an apron and set to work. She had made preparations already, hoping that he would be back today, as she explained, and it did not take long to have supper on the table. Clay, at this revelation that she had been looking for him, had a hard time to restrain himself from getting up and taking her in his arms. That might be a brotherly impulse, but he doubted it, and doubted still more if he could keep it to a purely brotherly casualness.

It seemed to him that her cheeks were a little pinker than usual, too, though that might be from bending over the stove. Temptation was shoved into the background as there came a rush of running feet outside, then Bub burst in through the open door.

"Golly, I'm glad you're back, Tod," he burst out. "It—it sure makes it nice."

"Thanks, but how?" Clay asked, amused at the boy's earnestness.

Bud was barefoot tonight. He twisted one big toe around, eyeing it as though he had never seen it before.

"Well—some of them—hearin' how much money Peg Leg had given you to take to the bank—they was hintin' mebby you wouldn't get back at all," he confessed. "Now they know a dang—a big sight better'n that."

"Why, Bub," Lou exclaimed. "Why should anybody think such a thing of my brother?"

"Your b—why, g-gosh—" Clay could see that, for the moment, Bub had forgotten that angle of it. He had been thinking, as had the others, about the man brought in to camp as a horse-thief, and pardoned without his likely guilt or innocence being settled. He flushed brick-red, staring out the door, then relief came into his eyes.

"They shouldn't, o' course, but some folks'd suspect their own grandmothers if there was better'n a dollar involved," the boy said all in a breath. "There comes Uncle Ty! See you later!"

He was gone, running, to where the laden mule team was just putting in a belated appearance. Ty Turner had time for his usual reserved show of affection—putting an arm quickly about the boy's shoulders, then asking the inevitable question.

"Been doin' yore own cookin', Bub? Looks to me like you've growed most of an inch since I saw you last."

If there was anything mechanical in this greeting, this time, or trouble deep in his uncle's eyes, Bub was too excited to notice it. Ty Turner was usually taciturn, and lack of words now meant little. Bub talked eagerly of the events of the past few days, while Uncle Ty and Tod had been gone, and of the return of the two of them. While he talked, he helped expertly with unloading the big, patient mules.

"I was sort of expectin' you back a couple days earlier," he said. "Somethin' slow you up?"

"Wagons was slow, this time," Turner explained.

"Golly, Uncle Ty, these mules are sure fine ones," Bub added admiringly. "You get about the best of anybody in this whole country, don't you?"

"I try," Turner admitted laconically.

"You do more'n try. And the way you're buildin' up—I bet pretty soon you'll have one of the biggest outfits in the country. And say, Tod is sure goin' to town, too. Know how many letters he brung in today? Six Hundred! Got a lot to take and mail, too. And nearly nineteen thousand in gold to take out as express. Why, his pony express is goin' great guns!"

BUB WAS rattling on, still full of enthusiasm.

"Sure was one of the best things that ever happened to this camp here, wasn't it, Uncle Ty?"

Turner considered this for a moment in silence, too. There was no envy in him, but there was a bitterness that had been growing with the days, while he reflected on the threat of Shave McNulty and the probable hopelessness of an effective fight against the Circle 7.

There had been a lot of deviltry afoot in this country for a long time, and if Turner had ever entertained doubts as to who was responsible, they had been pretty well resolved on this trip. With a crew of gunmen like the Circle 7 behind McNulty, much was clear.

Clay, of course, was not responsible for this or for what was starting to happen now. Not directly. Indirectly, it was a different story. Lou Hunter might be the big attraction which was bringing McNulty to a sharp interest in Five Corners. She could be attraction enough, Turner conceded.

But McNulty's sharp hatred for Clay Nyman, and the part he had in all this would be the real core of the whole thing. And in the long run, that would mean definite trouble for Clay as well as for himself. With this in mind, Turner answered.

"Mebby, Bub. Mebby. And then ag'in—I dunno. Mebby it was a bad thing—this comin' here."

10

BUB HAD been abruptly silenced by that answer, which rang strange in his ears. Because of the finality of the reply, he had not questioned it; but now, with experience of men far beyond his years, he noted the strangeness in his uncle, and the fact that something was troubling him. Something of which, he knew full well, Ty Turner would say nothing until he was good and ready to.

Clay had made arrangements for another horse, and it was ready in the morning.

He turned back, inside the house, and found Lou waiting for him. A different Lou that he had known before. There was something in her eyes as she looked at him, then as quickly away again, that made it hard for him to remain casual.

"Tod," she said. "I—you haven't told me—but was there any trouble on the other trip?"

"Why, nothing to speak of," he said, as lightly as he could, wondering how she had guessed. "Why?"

"Nothing, only—only, with you carrying so much gold—of course, nobody knew that you had it, before. But this time, everybody knows."

Suddenly her arms were about his neck, drawing him to her.

"Oh Tod—if anything happened to you—I've only just found you—I don't think I could stand it!"

"I'll take mighty good care to see that it don't," he promised, a little hoarsely. Her lips were salt on his own, and he wondered if that was her tears. For a moment he was strongly tempted to tell her that he was not Tod, to have all that deception behind him, and go on clear from there. But he heard Bub, whistling outside, and in any case, it wouldn't do—not now.

He swung to the saddle a moment later, waved, and was gone, not looking back. It seemed somehow incredible that life, which had been so simple and almost uneventful for a fiddle-footed man, up to so short a time before, could become so complicated in so short a time.

DUSK WAS settling before he reached the old cabin where he had spent the first night on the other trip. Half a mile short of it, he swung out into the trees and brush, circling widely, approaching it from the opposite direction. Everything looked peaceful enough, the same as when he had left it before. But while he had acted only on a hunch, there was now a definite feeling with him that something was wrong.

Keeping opposite the window, he reached the side of the shack, and stood there a moment, hidden by rank weeds and the creeping dark. Then he circled, going to the rear, and was almost under the window when he heard a low voice from inside.

"Ought to be comin', if he's going to, seems to me."

"Shut up, you fool!" That was McNulty's voice, unmistakable now. "He'll be along pretty soon, sure."

Silence fell again. Nodding to himself, Clay retraced his steps. Reaching his horse, he rode on again, putting half a dozen more miles between himself and the cabin before he made camp. He cooked his supper over a small fire hidden in the depths of a small draw, and having eaten, withdrew quietly for another quarter of a mile before making camp.

And he was on the move a full half hour before daylight, knowing that they would be on the lookout for him, scanning the horizon for a tell-tale smudge of smoke.

He had no proof, of course, that McNulty and his man had been waiting for him. No proof, only certainty. But that was so strong in his mind that he pushed his horse hard all forenoon, and at Cottonwood Creek, having banked the money or otherwise disposed of it according to order, he left the nearly spent cayuse to recuperate until the next trip, and bought another one.

Twice now he had foiled McNulty and he knew that the vengefulness in the man would be building up. But there was little likelihood of trouble

until the next trip out when he would be carrying gold again. There had been robberies, and worse, in this country for a long while now. But none was likely to be attempted unless it could be made to pay.

That was in his mind on the last day of the return trip, and he was riding fast and openly when he topped a rise in the road and saw one of the big mules. Here was timber, on either side of the trail—tall everygreens reaching somberly for the sky, the trail dipping down and down here for a while.

CLAY RECOGNIZED the mule instantly as one of Ty Tarner's. There were few such other mules anywhere in the country—big, fine animals. This one should have been plodding with laden pack saddle, and the sweat marks of the saddle could be seen plainly enough. But there was no saddle on the mule, and it was walking gingerly, with the red of terror still in its eyes and nostrils.

Just beyond were two others—likewise stripped of saddles. And then he saw Turner himself, at the bottom of the slope, almost beside a small creek which washed across the trail here. Hoof-marks were fresh in the mud and sand on either side, a medley of them. Water, still a little discolored, was still in process of filling some of the holes, proof that the last part of what had been enacted here had happened only a short time before.

But the first grim act might have been a little longer—long enough back that he had failed to hear the shooting, where he rode. Clay dismounted and went swiftly to the man lying sprawled there, oddly contorted, half on his back, with blood making a little, dirty puddle in the mud beside him.

A quick look was enough to tell that Turner was dead, though he was still warm, and his blood still oozed slowly from that wound right above the heart. And this, Clay knew, was murder.

With quick remembrance, he knew now that he hadn't been mistaken, when they had met at about this same spot, outward bound a few days before. Something had been troubling Ty and that something had caught up with him now.

Maybe not quite in the way that he had anticipated. But when it had come, it had been very final.

Turner lay, his right hand bent partly under him. Clutching his own revolver, which had not quite been dragged clear of the holster.

That was added proof, if more had been needed, that he had been surprised and shot down in cold blood. Clay looked about. There was plenty here to be read, the tale of what had happened, almost as clear as if written in blood. The mud and sand beside the creek had taken and held the record.

Several men had waited here, in ambush, on horseback—and had shot Turner down as he came. They had stripped off the pack saddles on the mules, probably transferring the saddles and loads intact to other animals which had been brought for that purpose, and had left the mules to run as they pleased—at least for the time being. They had been gone only a short time.

In his own mind, again, Clay was fairly certain as to who would have done this thing, But guesswork was not proof.

The thing to do would be to follow, and see. That would be easy to do, on such a fresh trail—but risky. But with anger welling in him at the cowardly murder, and the thought of Bub, left completely orphaned now, Clay was in no mood to hesitate. He turned toward his own horse, then stopped at the sight of something which he had overlooked before.

Another six-gun, dropped in the trail, half-covered by grass and leaves. He stooped and picked it up, catching the faint fresh smell of burnt powder, and was certain that this was the murder weapon. He was puzzling as to why it had been dropped and left behind, for that did not seem to fit, when a voice snapped at him from the brush not far off.

"Elevate fast, hombre! Try anything, and we'll make a sieve o' yuh! There's guns on you for both sides!"

In proof, men were stepping into

view with drawn guns—half a dozen of them, Shave McNulty in the lead.

11

THEY WERE exclaiming at sight of the dead man, as though this was all new to them this moment. With a gun held against his spine, there was nothing for Clay to do but submit, as his own gun and this other weapon were taken from him, and his hands jerked behind his back and tied. It was all curiously reminiscent of what had happened once before.

Twice he had fooled Shave McNulty; and twice McNulty had fooled him. This time, in so complete a manner that the thing had a grimly decisive quality to it.

They gathered Turner up, and put him across a saddle. And then, with Clay back in his own saddle, and the others all around him, they rode for Five Corners, much as he had ridden there the first time.

Not all of them went along. McNulty, after a few minutes of apparent deep thought, issued his orders.

"It's becomin' plain to me," he growled. "I knew, when first we caught this hombre, that he was a horse-thief—and no wonder there's been so much lawlessness an' robbery all around for a long time now. This time he'll not get out of it, by any fool luck!"

He glared at Clay now, and there was no acting about the venom in his eyes.

"This is a lonely stretch of trail, and he figgered murder'd be safe! Two of you boys ride now. See can you find where he's cached the freight the mules was carryin'. It'll have to be somewhere not far off, sure."

And then, inadvertently, he tipped his hand to Clay.

"And round up the mules, too. Then, when you find the stuff, load 'em up and bring it in to camp. They'll be needin' the goods there. Winter's not far off. And with Ty dead, it runs in my mind that somebody'll have to take over his job. That might be a good thing to consider, eh, boys?"

FIVE CORNERS was outwardly unchanged from the week before. And then, as they headed for the Tree, Clay saw the beginning of commotion. He saw Bub running, stopping to stare incredulously as he recognized him, then take a few slow, hesitant steps before turning to dart away again, probably to summon the alcalde.

A lump choked in Clay's throat. So far as he had been able to learn, Bub's Uncle Ty was the only relative that the boy had in the world. This was going to hit him—hard.

He searched the gathering crowd with anxious eyes for a glimpse of Lou, and did not see her. And was unsure whether he was glad or sorry. Now the men were around them, the story was being told, and there were exclamations and questions. Ranging from acceptance and hot anger to incredulity and disbelief.

"Ain't a bit of doubt about it," McNulty growled. "Here the other day we caught him, stealin' a horse—and brung him here and had him turned loose. Now he's back at his old tricks ag'in, only this time it's murder an' highway robbery."

As he had been silent before, in the face of accusations, so Clay was silent now. Talk, before Peg Leg arrived, would be only a waste of breath. Then he saw them coming—the alcalde hobbling excitedly, lurching more than usual, Lou and Bub with him.

Some of the others went to meet them, and he knew that they had the story before they arrived. He saw Bub's face go white and blank, then he stumbled a little in dumb misery, and Lou put a quick steadying arm about his shoulders. Peg Leg, after the first minute, was grim and inflexible, and strangely silent as he came forward.

The hub-hub of talk died away as the three approached. Peg-Leg marched straight to the big log, but Lou, without an instant's hesitation, crossed to where Clay was still in

the saddle, his hands tied behind his back. Her eyes searched his face in a swift scruntity.

"Tod!" she said. "I know there isn't a word of truth in it!"

Before Clay could reply, McNulty pushed forward.

"Mebby you don't know half as much about him as you think you do, Miss Hunter," he said. "When you understand everything—"

"I was talking to my brother, Mr. McNulty, not to you," Lou informed him coldly, and turned her back on him. Discomfited, McNulty chewed his lower lip, a moment then turned and pushed through the now silent gathering.

"Get down off that horse," Peg Leg ordered Clay. "And come over here." He regarded him a moment, gave an order that his hands should be freed. Someone slashed the rope, and Lou, once Clay was on the ground, put her arm about his shoulders, as she had done with Bub a little while before. The boy, even in his own grief, was mindful of his responsibility at such a time as this, and had taken his place beside the alcalde, with his pencil ready.

"I'm sorry to have to upset you, Lou, coming back this way," Clay said. "It wasn't just the way I'd planned it."

She gave his arm a little squeeze, as Peg Leg called for order.

"RECKON we have to do these things accordin' to law an' order," the alcalde said in his most frigidly judicial tones. "Can't say as I'm partial to the way some things are handled—but when a man's been killed, guess it don't leave much choice. Where's McNulty?"

He was not there, it developed. One of his crew explained that he and another of the Circle 7 were taking the body across to Turner's cabin.

"What 'n thunder's he doing that for?" Peg Leg demanded. "Go find him, and tell him to bring Ty here—and himse'f, too. Thunderin' powder, he better be quick about it, if he don't want to find himse'f in contempt of co't. Who's runnin' things here, anyway?"

Clay could see that Peg Leg was far more upset than usual, and that, he figured, was a good sign. Opinion among the crowd of miners to be divided, as to his own probable guilt or innocence. Clay took advantage of the opportunity.

"Your Honor, could I make a statement?" he asked. "Not about this matter, but about the express that I was bringing back with me when this happened?"

"Sure, go right ahead," Peg Leg agreed. "No reason why not."

"The gold that I carried on the trip out is all in the bank at Cottonwood, or taken care of the way you each asked me to do with it," Clay said. "I have receipts—or at least, I did. They were taken away from me when I was searched, in this other affair, but I suppose likely McNulty still has them. As for the things that some of you boys ordered, they're in my saddle-bags, along with quite a bunch of letters. Looks like givin' them out would have to wait a little while. But none of you are any more sorry about that than I am."

That brought a laugh from some of the onlookers. Public opinion, Clay judged, was pretty much for him, aside from the cowboys. And the miners did not look with much favor on the Circle 7, and never had. The method which McNulty had used to obtain possession of the ranch in the first place was pretty well known, and his crew were like himself, swaggering and arrogant.

Not only were those roisterers alien to Five Corners, but now they had arrested a man whom the camp regarded as one of its own.

The fundamental difference went even deeper. There had been a lot of lawlessness in this country for a long while now. The Circle 7 was trying to fasten the guilt of that upon him. But a lot of the miners had their own suspicions, just as his own had grown since coming to the mountain.

"Reckon we won't wait for McNulty," Peg Leg decided. "How many of you fellers was with him when this happened?"

THREE OF them professed to have been. The alcalde stabbed a bony finger at one of them.

"All right, Hawe. You tell this co't what you know about it, then."

Hawe, a little, wizened man, with an apolegetic air was hardly the accepted picture of a gunman. Yet Clay had heard him spoken of with awe, as one of the coldest blooded, deadliest killers that the Outpost country had ever seen. Now he looked around uneasily.

"Well—'course I was just ridin' long with the boss, was all. I'd druther he made the charges—"

"He's made 'em already," Peg Leg growled. "Murder. Now I'm askin' you what *you* know about it! Speak up!"

"Well—" Hawe mopped his face with a flaringly blue bandana. "We was just ridin' along—the bunch of us boys, when we heard some shootin', So o' course we investigated. When we got there, we found Ty Turner dead—and this hombre standin' over him with a smokin' gun. So we brung him along in."

"So that was it, eh?" Peg Leg's voice was dry. "In other words, you're accusin' Tod Hunter, here, of murderin' Ty Turner? That it?"

Hawe looked apolegetic again.

"Well—I don't like to say nothin' mean about anybody—never was one to gossip none. I—"

"But it was him you found, was it?" Peg Leg persisted.

"Well—yes, guess that's the size of it," Hawe agreed. "Though not meanin' no disrespect—"

Peg Leg snorted and turned to Clay.

"Reckon it's the right thing now to ask you whether you're guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," Clay said promptly.

"Um. You want I should app'int somebody to act as yore lawyer, or do ye prefer to do it yorese'f?"

"I'd prefer to do it myself."

"No reason why not. Anything you want to ask this witness, then?"

"There are a few things," Clay agreed. He turned to Hawe, who looked more unhappy than ever. "As I just heard it, you boys heard some shooting, and investigated. You came as soon as you heard the shooting?"

"Why, uh—yes, I guess we did."

"Being sure that you'd find murder, instead of someone just tryin' a little target practice, I suppose?"

"Well, I—I guess we didn't do no thinkin' about what it'd be. Just figfered to investigate."

"I see. You drop everything that you're doing, every time you hear a shot anywhere, and rush to investigate it, I suppose—but without thinking anything about it, of course?"

Hawe opened his mouth and closed it again, unhappily. Clay did not wait for an answer.

"And in this case, how long did it take you to get there?"

"Well, I—I don't rightly know." Hawe tried to bury himself in the bandana again. "I ain't much of a hand for tellin' time clost—"

"But you said that you got there in time to find me standin' over him—with a smoking gun! So that must have been less than a minute, at the longest. Is that correct?"

"I—I—" Hawe looked around in desperation, met Peg Leg's frosty glance, and gulped. "Well, mebby the gun wasn't still actually smokin'—"

"You said it was," Clay snapped at him. "Make up your mind. Was it, or wasn't it?"

"We-el—" Hawe was beginning to see the trap that he had dug for himself. "I guess prob'ly not."

"Everything you've said so far has been guesswork, by your own word. Weren't you there at all?"

Hawe bristled a little.

"Why, of course I was there. Ain't I just been tellin' you?"

"You've been tellin' a lot of things. Now you say the gun wasn't smoking. So how long did it take you to get there, after you heard the shooting?"

"I told you I didn't just know—"

"At least, you know how far you had to ride. How far was it?"

"We-el—" Hawe hesitated again. "Not s' very far—"

"Where were you when you heard the shooting?"

"Why—why, we was back a ways—"

"East of the road, or west? Which?"

"We-el—east, I guess. No—I reckon it must have been west. I'm not much good at directions—get all turned around—"

"But how far away were you? Do you know, or don't you?"

HAWE WAS being goaded to desperation. A gleam of the killer shone in his eyes for a moment now.

"What diff'rence does it make?" he demanded. "We found you—"

Peg Leg rapped with the butt of a six-shooter on the log.

"You'll answer questions, not ask them," he warned. "Now answer straight, and quit stallin'. Or Mebby we'll hang you for poor jury."

"Well—mebby a quarter of a mile," Hawe decided.

"And you rode there at a gallop, I suppose?" Clay persisted.

"Sure we did. We caught you, didn't we?"

"You found me there," Clay agreed. "That's all. But I'd like to tell the court *how* they caught me."

"Go ahead," Peg Leg agreed. "They don't seem to know."

"I was ridin' along, heading this way, when I saw one of Ty Turner's pack mules, running loose without a saddle. Then I saw some others. And next, at the little creek in the hollow, I found Ty. He was lying there, dead. Looked to have been dead close to half an hour, as nearly as I could judge. The mules were scattered, but the saddles and packs had been stripped off. Then I found a dropped gun, and as I picked it up, they found me—though what they really did was to jump me from all sides, as if they'd been layin' there, watching for quite some time."

He looked around for a moment, while the hush held.

"Ty was murdered—I agree with that. And robbed. After they grabbed me, McNulty ordered his men to find the packs and bring them in to camp. My guess is that some of it won't get here at all. But if Ty had been killed the way Hawe claims, by me, and they had come up that fast, would I have had time to strip the saddles off the mules, and hide the packs—and still have been standin' over him with a smoking gun in my hand?"

"Don't seem reasonable," Peg Leg grunted. His voice was as dour as ever, but there was a sparkle in the back of his eye now. "Want to call any more witnesses?"

"I thought the prosecution was presentin' witnesses now," Clay said mildly.

"Yeah. Guess they did start to. What about the rest o' yuh?" Peg Leg barked. "You got anything to say about it? Thunderin' powder, you look like a bunch of spanked school kids."

The other Circle 7 members looked unhappily at each other. One of them had hurried away in search of McNulty. Now their faces lighted a little.

"Here comes the boss," one of them said. "Ask him."

"In other words," Clay said. "They say what they're told to—or nothing at all."

But if things had gone badly for McNulty's cause in the time of his absence, at least he had not wholly wasted them. One man was leading the horse to which Turner's body was still tied. But McNulty, Clay saw with a sudden chill, carried something in his hand—the wooden marker which had stood above the grave of Tod Hunter.

12

McNULTY was scowling blackly as he listened to the story of events which the messenger was panting into his ear. He shot a look at the hapless Hawe which made that apolegetic little man shy like a nervous cayuse, and planted himself unceremoniously in front of Peg Leg.

"You was in a mighty big hurry to get this started, wasn't you?" he shouted at the alcalde. "Couldn't even give a man time to take care of the body or anything—"

"Silence!" Peg Leg roared him

down. "Any more such talk to this here co't'll get you in contempt—and the co't has got about all the contempt it can stand a'ready for some folks! Thunderin' powder, you go chasin' off like a crazy hen chasin' grasshoppers! Now if you got somethin' to say, say it!"

"I'll say it," McNulty growled. "Ain't the word of six of us plenty, that we caught this hombre red-handed, bendin' over the dead man, with the gun still in his hand?"

"We ain't decided that yet," Peg Leg told him. "You make the claim that it was that way, eh?"

"You're mighty right, I make it." McNulty turned, straightened a little, and his voice grew quieter, deeper, almost impassioned. The man would have made a good actor, Clay reflected.

"If I've lost my temper, I beg the court's pardon," McNulty went on. "The only reason I'm upset about this is because Ty was my friend—and I aim to see his killer stretch hemp! That, and plenty other things connected with it, have upset me. There's Bub, there—just a kid, and all alone now. I was thinkin' of that."

He looked at Bub who was passing a rough sleeve across his eyes and trying to keep his face screwed up past the point of tears. McNulty's voice was unexpectedly gentle.

"Bub," he said. "I'm going to ask you one question, man to man. Do you think this hombre—" jerking a thumb at Clay. "Is yore real friend? Or that his comin' here was a good thing for the camp?"

Clay looked at Bub, a little surprised at the question. Bub hesitated, then shook his head miserably.

"I—I dunno," he gulped.

McNulty shot a triumphant look around.

"There's another thing," he went on. "That's been burnin' me up, I just now went over to Ty's cabin, and what do you think I found? Take a look at it," he added to Lou. "And see who your real friends are. Here he claims to be yore brother—which shows that he's a crook. Since this makes it look like yore brother had been dead quite some time."

A tense hush had fallen as he made this disclosure and held up the headboard with Tod Hunter's name still roughly legible upon it. Everyone knew the truth of that, and they realized the desperation in McNulty when he had to resort to such a trick.

If he had thought to stagger Lou with it, to create a scene, he was disappointed. Lou looked at the weathered board a moment, and there was moisture in her eyes. Otherwise her face did not change, until she looked at McNulty, and then scorn was like a hot flame.

"Just what are you trying to say?" she asked.

"That he's an imposter. That he ain't your brother at all," McNulty said, but now the words lacked conviction.

This time, her contempt blazed at him openly.

"Do you think I didn't know that?" Lou demanded. "Did you suppose I wouldn't be able to tell that, as soon as I set eyes on him? What do you take me for, anyway?"

McNULTY blinked and retreated a step, and Clay flushed uncomfortably, but she did not look at him.

"B-but you acted like you thought he was yore brother," McNulty protested. "If you knew he wasn't, why'd you act that way?"

"How would you expect me to act?" she flashed. "I had come a long way, looking for him, and everybody told me that he was Tod. And I had been told that Five Corners was a man's camp, where a woman wouldn't be allowed at all. Something was going on, and I was here to find out things. If the rest of you wanted to play a game, I could play it, too."

Then, for just an instant, she looked at Clay, and smiled.

"I didn't know what was going on," Lou went on. "But I aimed to find out. It didn't sound right to me, but I kept mum and waited. It didn't take long to find out what was back of it all. Folks here were trying to be kind to me, to help me out—and whether they were bungling the job,

or not, wasn't the point. I know that you all meant well."

She flashed a tremulous smile which included Peg Leg and Bub, who were listening and watching, looking as abashed as Hawe had done, but eager.

"And I found out that Clay was doing what the rest of you made him. He didn't have any choice in the matter. But he not only looked like Tod, he acted just the way that Tod would have acted! He's been a gentleman, and it's that that convinces me that he's innocent now!"

Whatever McNulty had been playing for, this was certainly not it. Clay was a little staggered at Lou's revelation. He had rather prided himself on doing a good job of acting, but she had certainly outclassed him in that respect. And yet—remembering various things, a doubt was beginning to grow in his mind. Maybe she was doing the acting now.

An ordinary crowd would have cheered Lou in that moment. Admiration and respect was in the faces of the miners, but they were not much given to demonstration. McNulty, his face matching his hair, was floundering. He looked like a mad dog held in leash. Peg Leg, recovering his breath, swung on him testily.

"You knew all about this, the same as the rest of us did, McNulty," he reminded. "Knew what we was tryin' to do, and why. And so you set yore-se'f above the rest of this camp, and me, the dooly elected alcalde, to decide what to do, did you? Well, one thing's plain enough, without this farce goin' any farther. Ty Turner was murdered—but the evidence of yore own hirelings shows plain enough that the killin' couldn't have been done by Clay, here. So I'm turnin' him loose, right now. And I'm warnin' you, don't be going off half-cocked with any more of these fool arrests. We're gettin' almighty tired of 'em!"

"Tired, are you?" McNulty gritted. "Well, that goes for us at the Circle 7, too. We're gettin' plenty tired of being given the run-around, every time we come to this camp. Don't worry, we'll not pester you ag'in when there's any lynchin' to be done, We'll tend to it—and anybody that don't like it can have some more of the same!"

He glared balefully from Peg Leg to Clay, and only the fact that the Circle 7 were so badly outnumbered prevented open trouble, Clay knew. Then, ominously silent, McNulty, departed, with his crew falling in behind him.

PEG LEG looked at Clay and beckoned him closer as the others began to drift away.

"From yore story, Clay, one thing's mighty plain—and another's stickin' up like a rattler's head above his coils," he said grimly. "Ty was murdered. And nobody around handy at the time, aside from you—and them buzzards from the Circle 7."

"That's the way it looks," Clay agreed.

"You say they was layin' there in the brush, waitin' to jump you?"

"Waitin' till I found that gun and picked it up. That seemed to be the signal."

"Which shows, plain as day, who it was that done the killin'," Peg Leg growled. "We ought to string 'em all up—but we've made the law feared around here by goin' accordin' to law—thunderin' powder what a mess! Either we got to act like outlaws, or be put on by a pack o' thieves!"

"You've shown that you're plumb dependable, Clay," Peg Leg said. "Ev'ybody knows that, now. But most folks are ponderin' whether to send out any more gold with you. Trouble's pretty apt to be campin' on yore trail."

Clay shrugged.

"I'm about in the mood to meet it," he said.

"Can't say's I blame yuh none," the alcalde confessed. "But trouble carries mighty long odds."

Clay was thoughtful as he turned back to the cabin.

IT WAS evening now, and the sun was just about to dip out of sight in the west. Down in the valley it had been gone for an hour or so,

but here, high on Outpost, it still lingered. Its last rays caught Lou in a warm embrace, framing her in glory—in a soft beauty which made Clay catch his breath.

Then, in the next instant, he saw that she had not been watching for him, nor opening the door now to welcome him. Instead, she had her things tied up in a compact bundle, and was just about to leave.

She stopped at sight of him, and color washed across her cheeks. Clay spoke first.

"You—you're not leaving, Lou?"

Something in the dismay in his voice made her look up quickly. Then she nodded, matter-fo-factly.

"Of course," she said. "What else is there to do? You—you've been very kind, Clay But I can't stay here—now, very well. And—and there's nothing to keep me in Five Corners—any longer."

"Nothing to keep you? But what's so different?" he blurted out. "You said that you knew from the start—"

He stopped, seeing the fresh flush of scarlet riot up from the roots of of her hair, realizing that he had blundered. Then she faced him angrily.

"What else was I to tell them?" she demanded. "Would you have had me be a fool before them all?"

Clay stared at her, bewildered. It was coming to him, as many another man had decided on the same subject before him, that the more a man knew about a woman, the less he could hope to understand her.

"But you—" he said. "I thought—you—you seemed to like me. And if you knew that I wasn't your brother—"

Her cheeks were completely scarlet now.

"Do you think I would have—have acted that way, if I *had* known?" she gasped. "Oh, I—I hate you!"

Turning, she sped away, almost running. In those few moments the sun had left, the swift dark was beginning to close down.

13

CLAY STARED after her bewildered, desperate. The settling dark seemed like a symbol, with her gone. And looking beyond where she had stood, to the open door of the cabin, at the emptiness beyond, he knew just how desolate it would really be now.

She had said that she hated him! Well, he couldn't blame her. He had known from the start that she would hate him when she learned the truth. That was just about inevitable. But if she had known the truth from the start—

He stood, pondering that for a moment, and then he began to understand. She had told him one thing, and that to the others, standing with him against Shave McNulty and his charges. Remembering her last words, he saw that actually she had not known.

She had been just a girl, when her brother had left home, and that had been three years before. Here, she had accepted him as Tod—at least at first. If she had begun to doubt, later on, she had had the wit to keep it to herself.

There was a little gasping cry, and then he was running as well. Lou had stumbled and fallen headlong. He reached her side, just as she was sitting up, more angry than ever. But this time he did not make the mistake of trying to say anything, or even of trying to help her up. She was scrambling up at sight of him, her hair and dress disordered, but her bundle had fallen. Clay picked it up and slung it over his own shoulder.

"Give it to me!" she said, and extended a hand.

Clay stook his head.

"I'll carry it for you," he said. "And won't you at least come back and cook supper for me? I've been lookin' forward to that for a week, now. Can't we talk things over a little?"

For a moment she hesitated, then her old bright smile flashed again.

"Why not?" she asked. "Maybe I am losing my head. You aren't responsible for what has happened. And folks can't blame me for cooking your supper, anyway."

"I don't think that anybody's blaming you for anything, Lou," he said gravely. "This whole camp is eatin' right out of your hand—and that includes myself. Nobody wants you to leave, Lou. And where would you go if you did?"

They had reached the cabin again by now, and he set down the pack and turned to light a candle. Since she made no answer, he repeated the question.

"Where would you go?"

"I don't just know," she admitted. "But I could find something to do somewhere, I'm sure. The Adams and Company Express have a big office in San Francisco, with a lot of clerks—"

"Likely you could get something to do all right," Clay agreed. "But what about me? All my life I've wanted a sister—and never had one till you came along. Are you going to walk out of my life just that way? Don't I deserve a little consideration?"

"But I can't stay here," she protested. "Now."

"Why not? I'll still be out of town, most of the time. I can take my meals here—if you'll be good enough to cook them for me when I'm around—and as for the rest of it—well, maybe Bub will let me bunk with him."

She considered that for a moment, thoughtfully.

"But don't you see?" she said. "Since I'm not your sister—I can't very well let you support me, for nothing."

HE HAD the answer for that.

"It won't be for nothing. This express business is buildin' up fast, since Adams or Wells-Fargo haven't reached this far. If you want a job with an express company, why not with mine? I'm going to need somebody workin' here, just about full time, keeping a few books, handlin' things here. I'll have to hire some extra men to help me on the road, and a lot of things. You can handle things here in camp. It'll be a good job, and help me out no end."

"Are—are you sure?" she asked. "You're not just making this up?"

"Cross my heart," he said soberly. "I need your help, Lou."

She smiled quickly, then a shadow crossed her face again.

"But this express business of your's—you are doing grand at it, I know that. But—but won't there be a lot of danger for you—after this?"

"Apt to be some," Clay confessed. "But I don't aim to be caught a third time the way I have been twice. And if anybody's lookin' for trouble—I'll give 'em all they want."

"I know," her voice was almost a whisper. "But—if you were killed—"

"And that's another reason why you need to stay," Clay went on. "Bub just about worships the ground you walk on. If you were to go now, just after he's lost his uncle, the poor kid would be completely lost."

"Let's eat, then I must go over and see him," Lou nodded. "It is hard on him. And—Clay, I was just thinking, What will he do now?"

"I've been thinking about that too," Clay agreed. "His mules—for they will belong to him now, of course—need to be kept at work. The camp needs them to keep bringin' freight in. And he needs what they'll bring."

"But he isn't big enough to do a job like that," Lou protested. "He is big beyond his years, in a lot of ways, but that would be too much."

"I've got something to suggest," Clay said. "When we talk to him."

Presently they were walking through the soft dark toward the other cabin. They found the alcalde there, along with Bub, but as they came he stood up, a little stiffly.

"Goin' to be a storm 'fore long," he said. "Feel it in my leg—where it's gone. Always ketches me that way."

"Wait a while," Clay urged. "I want to talk business with Bub, and we'd like to have you set in on it."

"Why, shore," Peg Leg agreed. "Fire away."

"In a minute." Clay turned to Bub. "First, I want to get one thing straight. When McNulty asked you

if you thought my coming to camp had been a bad thing, you weren't sure, Bub. Mind tellin' me why?"

BUB HESITATED a moment, then nodded.

"That was what Uncle Ty said when I was talkin' to him the other day," he confessed. "That mebby it wasn't a good thing."

"That means that McNulty had been threatenin' him, like I thought and it tied in with me," Clay nodded. "But do you think that I killed your Uncle, Bub? Give me an honest answer."

"Golly, no," Bub protested. "I know darn well you didn't. You ain't that kind."

"Thanks," Clay said. "Now I can talk. It's about the freight buisness, and your mules. They belong to you now, of course. My idea is this. My express business is growing, and I've got to have some help. I've already spoken to a few men. Well, I might just as well run the freight end of it, too. They'll sort of fit it together. Think you'd like me for a pard, Bub? And you be sort of a partner in the express end off it, too, to even it up?"

Bub stared for a moment, incredulously, then his eyes shone.

"You—you mean we'd work things together?" he demanded.

"That's the idea," Clay agreed, and he saw that there was a pleased light in Lou's eyes as well.

"We been tryin' to figger what to do with the mules," Peg Leg declared. "Winter'll be closin' down on us any day now, up here, and we need all the supplies we can get. Ought to have more'n we do. I'm for this idea. Only —" he shot a look at Clay. "What was this that you was sayin', about findin' the mules scattered—and their packs off?"

"That's the way I found them. My guess is that the Circle 7 aimed to get me in bad, make it look as if I'd done the shootin', with the notion of robbery behind it. And they likely knew that I was coming along. But maybe they miscalculated, and I got there just to soon, and kind of upset some plans."

The alcalde nodded.

"That's about the way I figure it, too," he agreed. "But what else?"

"I think the big thing was to get rid of Ty and get hold of his mules. McNulty remarked that somebody would have to run the business—and that it would be a good one."

"Yeah. I was wonderin' if there was somethin' like that back of it—why thunderin' powder, man! You do this and you'll be bustin' right in where he don't want you a—tall. It'll mean plenty trouble."

"Trouble isn't like a creek," Clay said quietly. "It can run two ways."

There was silence a moment, then he went on.

"I've about persuaded Lou to stay on and handle the business here in Five Corners—it will keep somebody busy, with books to keep and all. Not to mention cookin' for me when I'm around—mebby for Bub too, eh, pardner? And if you don't object, I'll bunk with you, Bub, when I'm here."

"That's grand," Bub agreed. "Only —if we're going to do it that way—let's make it a three-way partnership, with Miss Lou havin' a share, too."

"Pard," Clay said solemnly. "That's a mighty fine idea. It suits me right down to the ground."

But Lou shook her head, smiling.

"Nothing doing," she said. "I'll do my job, as agreed before, but that doesn't entitle me to be a partner."

"Say," Bub added excitedly. "How about me going along with you? I can help with the mules."

"There'll be plenty for you to do, after things get going," Clay agreed. "Right now, though, the two of you will have plenty to do, tending to things here. I'll go out in the morning again and hire some extra men, get things going. You any ideas about a good man that we could get here, to start the mules back tomorrow?"

"Might get Dick Goodman," Peg Leg suggested. "His claim ain't much. And he's a good man.

Goodman, interviewed a little later, proved willing. He was a big man, stolid, slow-moving, with a face which rarely showed any expression,

a thatch of tow-colored hair and beard, all badly in need of trimming. But the prospect of trouble did not even make him blink.

"I get along pretty good with mules," he said. "Kind of talk their language. I'll be ready to ride."

THEY WERE off the mountain now, jogging steadily ahead. Goodman had not once volunteered a word since they had started. Clay turned to him.

"You know how to use that gun you're packin'?" he asked.

Goodman nodded, without expression.

"Pretty good," he agreed.

"Keep it handy," Clay advised. "And if things come up—shoot first and ask questions afterward."

Goodman nodded again.

"Sure," he said.

It was late afternoon when they sighted Horseshoe Bend, which consisted of a livery stable, a combination hotel and store, and a couple of saloons. The big jerk-line string of wagons was just pulling in to town as they came in sight—the string which they were to meet.

There were several visitors in town, prospectors, cowboys, small ranchers, who had come in to secure a few supplies as well. Here and there the gay colored outfits of the early *Californioes* were visible. But for the most part the invaders who had swarmed like locusts out of the east, and who had taken over like locusts, dominated the scene.

Horses were tied to trees or hitch-rails, there was a scattering of other conveyances such as were never seen in mile-high Five Corners—a buggy, a couple of spring wagons, two or three lumber wagons.

But there were others in Horseshoe Bend today as well, and ahead of them. Clay saw them as they came in full view of it. A score of mules and burros, with empty pack saddles. No such animals as those which Turner had carefully gathered, but a motley collection, hastily assembled. And good enough to pack freight, of course.

And lounging there beside them, awaiting the arrival of the freight wagons, was Shave McNulty.

14

THE LEAD wagon was pulling to a stop now, and McNulty was moving toward it. Two of his crew watched the mules and burros. Clay jogged up and pulled to a stop as well.

McNulty was wasting no time.

"Turner's dead," he said flatly. "I'm here to take over his freightin' job."

It was apparent that the boss driver, Risken, knew him, and just as easy to see that he did not care particularly for him. He was a tall, rail-thin man, with a big head set rather precariously on a long neck, and now he twisted this about, looking from McNulty and his animals to Clay and the other mules, which he of course knew. He spat hurriedly.

"Ty dead, ye say? When? How come?"

"Somebody shot him, yesterday," McNulty growled. "You can ask them about it in Five Corners. They seem to know so much."

"Murdered? Dang! Allers liked Ty." He swung a keen glance to compass Clay. "Got his mules here, I see"

"Yes," Clay agreed. "I'm looking after them now, in partnership with Turner's nephew, who inherits them. We're prepared to keep the same service as before."

"Eh? Things are comin' a mite fast. Slow down some. Mebby you can tell me more about this here killin'?"

"I found Ty, where he'd been shot," Clay explained. "Then McNulty and his crew jumped me—accused me of doing it. They took me in to Five Corners for trial. Peg Leg and the camp agreed that I was innocent."

"Likely ye was, in that case. Set c'nsiderable store by Peg Leg's jedgment. . . They hain't caught the real killer yet?"

"Not yet."

"That's not the point," McNulty cut in. "I didn't figure there would be anybody ready to handle the

freight, so I got these animals together, to accommodate you and the camp. Do I get it?"

"Why should ye? Long as the reg'lar mules are here?"

"Just one reason," McNulty said grimly. "Whatever those fools in Five Corners think, this man is a bad egg. You can't depend on him. You'll want somebody you can depend on. And, since I've gone to the trouble of gettin' the animals, I aim to get the business, Risken. I'll make you a price that's worth it."

Risken looked from him to the watchful, silent Clay, and his eyes twinkled a little.

"Yeah?" he agreed. "What price?"

McNulty looked challengingly at Clay for a moment.

"I'll take the load this trip for five cents a pound," he declared.

"H'm." Risken scratched his chin thoughtfully, with the butt of his long whip. "Five cents. Been payin' nine. Quite a diff'rence."

"I told you that I was after the business," McNulty snapped, and his look at Clay was mixed with animosity and triumph.

"Money talks," Risken conceded. "Almost yells, sometimes." He looked at Clay. "Bein' it's all sorter new now, I reckon it'll need a new contract, too. What you got to say, hey?"

Clay shrugged.

"A few days rest will do the mules good," he said. "We'll be on hand as usual next trip—at the old rate."

Risken swung his slow gaze back to McNulty again.

"Ye hear that?" he demanded.

"I'll carry it next trip for the same price," McNulty agreed, but he was scowling now.

"If he can do it for five, we'll do it for four—this trip," Clay said softly. He had McNulty over a log now, and he intended to roll him a a little. At four cents a pound, or even five, no one could make that haul without losing money.

"Four, hey?" Risken's glance brightened a little. "Now we're sort of talkin' business. Sounds right promisin', in fact. What you got to say to that, McNulty?"

McNULTY CHOKED. But he was ready with an answer.

"Three cents a pound," he said. "See can you beat that!"

"I wouldn't want to try," Clay assured them pleasantly. "But my suggestion, Mr. Risken, is that you get a long-term agreement signed at that rate. Be a lot cheaper than say—fifteen or twenty cents a pound."

McNulty glared, but he was whipsawed, and knew it.

"Everybody knows my word's good," he barked.

"We-el, now, there's words an' words," Risken conceded. "Le's see, you agree to haul this freight reg'lar at three cents a pound, heh?"

"I'll haul it this trip an' next, at that," McNulty corrected. "I ain't promisin' how long. Have to see how it works out."

Risken fingered his chin again.

"Me, I'm a Yankee," he sighed. "Raised daown east. Hurts me to think of turnin' down such a offer. Yep. But they's other things. You willin' to haul steady for nine cents a pound, feller, same as Ty done?" he demanded of Clay.

"Same service, same price," Clay agreed. "If there's no break."

Risken spat.

"Might's well load yore mules," he agreed. "I got a contract with the Mercantile at Five Corners—and I like to have things so I know how they'll go—week after next, mebby, same as today."

Clay hid a smile. McNulty was staring, incredulous. Then his bewilderment gave way to fury.

"You don't mean to say that you're givin' him the job—at nine cents?" he demanded. "Are you a damn fool?"

"We-el, now, nobody ain't ever proved it—yit." Risken drawled, but his eyes were cold. "And I mean just that. I'm givin' him the job. You offer a price that you'd have to aim to make up on, soon as he was froze out. And you won't guarantee that price more'n two weeks. Nope, I don't think I'm a fool—not yit."

"I'll haul reg'lar for eight cents," McNulty protested, then, seeing the refusal in Risken's eyes, added des-

perately. "After the first two trips. I'll make them at three, same as I promised."

Risken shook his head decisively.

"McNulty," he said. "I wouldn't hire ye now to clean a stable. Nope. Kinda partic'lar, mebby, but I ain't no fool—leastways, as I say, nobody's ever proved it—yit!"

McNulty's face colored to match his hair, but after a moment he shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he agreed. "When yore stuff don't go through, and you want to make a deal with me to get it there—then we'll see."

He turned away, and Risken favored Clay with a slow, appraising look which ended in a grin.

"Sounded sorter like mebby he was threatenin' both of us," he said. "Reckon he ain't goin' to get away with it, eh?"

"Not if I can help it," Clay agreed, and for the next few minutes was busy with answering Risken's shrewd questions about what was going on at Five Corners, and around Outpost Mountain, and getting some idea of the freight business. Risken, he decided, was a Yankee, as he claimed to be—a shrewd trader, but an equally careful judge of men. And that had turned him against McNulty.

With the details attended to, he turned to look for Goodman, and saw him near the store, in conversation with another man who lounged and picked at his teeth with a thorn, and viewed the world through quick, careless-seeming eyes. Goodman approached, and his companion turned with a wave and lounged toward the livery stable.

"Just passin' the time o' day with Mort, there," Goodman explained. "Mort an' me used to ride together. Ain't seen him for a month o' Sundays, till today. He's sorta between jobs, right now."

HE DID not bother to explain what he meant by that, and Clay was too busy for the time to think much about it. Getting the mules loaded and properly packed was no job for a novice. Goodman, he was relieved to discover, understood the intricacies of the diamond hitch and knew something of packing, though there were a few fine points which Clay himself had picked up in the past which were helpful.

Finally it was done, and Goodman pulled out with the mules. Clay turned to the hotel, finding the dining room empty save for Goodman's friend, Mort, who was dawdling over his meal at another table. After a moment, thoughtfully, Clay crossed and pulled out a chair at the same table.

"If you don't mind," he suggested.

Mort looked up, and his sleepy-seeming eyes, Clay saw, were really quick and speculative. The sleepiness was like that of a perching hawk, ready to go into instant action.

"Not at all," he agreed. "Goodman said he was working for you."

"You're good friends?"

Mort waved a negligent hand.

"He saved my neck for me a time or so," he said. And let it go at that.

He seemed likeable, and Goodman had said that he was his friend. Clay made his decision.

"You wouldn't be interested in a job—that might do as much for him, mebby?" he asked.

"Since you put it that way, I might."

"What I want you to do," said Clay. "Is to ride along, back off the trail. Keep out of sight—so that he doesn't know you're along. And so that nobody else knows it, either. But if anything tries to happen to him—you should be handy to take a hand."

Mort's speculative glance brightened a little.

"Such as?" he asked.

"Ty Turner was murdered—trailin' those same mules. No tellin' what might happen next."

Mort appeared to muse on that for a while. Then he nodded.

"You've hired yourself a man," he agreed. "Since he went south, I'll ride out north—and circle."

15

McNULTY KNEW that he had bungled. Lou hated him now. She had stood up for Clay, and if he had entertained any doubts before, that it might be a purely sisterly affection which she felt for him, those doubts had been resolved.

The knowledge of it made McNulty ugly, but the certainty clarified his course of action. There was nothing more to be gained by pretense. Nor by half-way measures. Indeed, as he had belatedly recognized, Clay Nyman was far more than the drifter that he had first believed him to be. Clay was building up, and fast, to be a power in the country. It was a case of smash him now, or be smashed.

"Goodman pulled out with the mules, more'n an hour ago," the man reported. "Nyman, he left an hour back, too. Want we should go after 'em?"

McNulty shook his head.

"Not tonight," he said. "They'll be too close here. I got a better idea. Two of you will follow the mules, tomorrow. And listen close, for I don't want any bungling. When he camps tomorrow night will be your chance."

He talked for a few minutes, low-toned, imperative. Then he dismissed the pair for that job, turned to the other two of his crew who had come up now as well.

"And we'll follow Nyman, tomorrow," he said. "And be ready when we reach a good spot, which should be late in the afternoon as well. When we get through with these two jobs, there'll be nothing more to worry about."

GOODMAN HAD ridden, that day, with a wary eye peeled for trouble. But the fact that the threatened storm had come during the night, and lasted throughout the day, a steady, raw drizzle, which cut visibility to a few rods on either side, had not helped. Goodman was a stolid man, not much given to imagination, but even his nerves were a little taut as the early dark drew on again.

He made camp building a small fire in a sheltered spot, and put the coffee pot among the coals, then made a brief tour of inspection to see that all was well, before it grew too dark to see at all. Since nothing had happened up to now, he decided, nothing was apt to happen. Nobody could find him, in this pitch-black night which was coming.

He returned, poured a cup of the black coffee, and drank it, reveling in the almost scalding quality, for chill had worked into the recesses of his body during the long wet hours.

Suddenly he sat down, feeling weary, dizzy. The fire-light flickered crazily, and he tried to put his back against a small tree, to brace himself as he sat. Instead, he missed it, and sprawled, half on his side, snoring lustily. Rain drops made a small hiss in the dying fire.

HE HAD been sleeping less than a minute when two of McNulty's men came out of the dusk. One of them stopped above Goodman briefly, stirred him a little with his foot, then nodded.

"Dead to the world," he said. "Won't trouble us none."

"When we pull out, I'll see that he's past troublin' anybody," the other man said grimly.

He threw more wood on the fire, so that it flamed up brightly again. Then looked around with distaste on the stormy night.

"Good time for what we're doin'," the first retorted. "Covers all tracks."

Swearing and grunting, the two moved about, getting ready to round up the hobbled mules. They were still by the fire, one of them lifting the coffee pot off the coals, when Mort stepped suddenly out into the light, which rippled along the wet barrel of his gun with a dull shine.

"Reach!" he ordered softly, while the pair stared in slack-jawed amazement. "High! I'm a mite touchy, and this gun might go off—hold it, you! Don't spill that cawfee!"

He stepped forward, expertly re-

lieved them of their guns, looked toward where Goodman now lay inert.

"What've you done to him?" he demanded. "If you've killed him—"

"He ain't hurt none," one of them squawked. "Honest, he ain't. We jus' slip—"

He broke off as his companion, holding the coffee pot, administered a sharp kick to him and took over.

"Naw, he ain't hurt much," he explained. "Tried to act up, and we had to sorter give him a love-tap over the noggin. Nothin' much. He'll be wakin' up pretty soon, good as ever."

Mort grunted, watching them warily, his eyes going hungrily to the coffee which, he supposed, they had been about to drink. He too, was chilled from the long wet day.

"He better," he warned. "If he don't you hombres'll be sleepin' just as sound. Take a cup and pour me some of that cawfee," he added.

The man with the pot obeyed, with a seeming reluctance. Still watching them, Mort took the cup and drank.

16

HIS DEAL with Mort concluded, Clay had been preparing to leave Horseshoe Bend when Tip Noble galloped into town.

"Hi, feller," he hailed, and, bringing his horse to a stop, dismounted, awkwardly but thankfully. He tried the feel of both feet on the ground again, and shook his head.

"Whoose! But it feels good to have somethin' solid under not—not but what that critter is almighty solid for somethin' stuffed with hay! Guess I never was meant for fast travelin' like that."

"What brings you here, Tip?" Clay asked.

"Mainly two things brung me," he added. "Both havin' to do with you. The alcalde, he wanted somebody to follow you, and he asked me if I would do it. Glad to oblige, of course. A man gets kind of tired of diggin' in one spot all summer, even for gold." His boyish face broke into a grin again.

"What did Peg Leg want?" Clay asked.

"You sure stick to a question like a burr to a horse's tail, don't you? Well, the way of it was, one of the Circle 7 crew lingered in Five Corners and had himself a few drinks more than his capac'ty. Got to runnin' off loose at the tongue. Braggin' that next time, there'd be no misfire about a lynchin' by draggin' you to town. Peg Leg, he had him tossed in a cabin to sleep it off, but he figgered you ought to know that they was really cookin' up some devilment."

"I'm sure obliged to you for all this trouble," Clay nodded. "And the other thing?"

Noble's grin came out again.

"Feller," he said. "If 't wasn't that I've got a girl of my own, back where I come from, a girl with as purty a head of yeller hair you ever did see, and that you brung me two letters from her, I'd sure be jealous of you! A purty gal like Lou, thinkin' about you, when there's fellers with charm an' good looks like me around camp!"

Still grinning, he delved in a pocket and brought out a small object, which he tendered. It was a curious thing, rather like a flattened lump of rough metal, with a dull sheen to it. Rounded, some three inches in diameter, and with a fine silver chain attached to it. Clay regarded it in bewilderment, noting its extraordinary weight.

"What on earth is this thing?" he demanded.

"Search me," Noble confessed. "All I know is that Lou, hearin' that I was headin' for the Bend, here, and knowin' that I'd be apt to see you, she draws me aside and asks me will I do you a favor, and her too, and give this to you. Course, I said I'd be delighted to oblige, and the smile she gives me is like seein' a dark house all lit up sudden with mebby a dozen candles. Ever notice the way she has of smilin'? Sure pretty. Oh yes. She said to tell you that this piece has been in her family for a long time. Her great grand-pappy, he picked it up somewhere on a sea v'yage, when he was just a young man. Figgered

it was a lucky piece, and had that chain put on it and wore it around his neck.

"Seems that his son and this *his* son, who was Lou's pappy, they both wore it, too. Set a lot of store by it, I guess. Anyway, she's worried about you, that's easy to see, and she wanted you to have it. Thought it might help you, I guess. So I brung it."

Clay regarded it in growing wonder. It wasn't very big, but it was certainly heavy for its size, and he had never seen anything quite like it before. Ordinarily, he didn't put much stock in lucky pieces, but this was different. If Lou thought that much about him, and would send a treasured heirloom—that, at least, was luck enough for any man!

"Thanks, Tip," he said. "When you see her, tell her I sure appreciate it."

"She wanted you to wear it," Noble reminded.

"And I'll do just that," Clay agreed. Feeling a little foolish, he slipped the chain about his neck and the lucky piece inside his shirt. It came down several inches, but the reflection that, more than likely, Lou had worn this against her own skin, made it seem pleasant. Presently he rode out of town.

HE CAME, in early afternoon, to an occupied cabin, one of the rare ones along this route, and swung in. The owner, known simply as Baldy, greeted him warmly.

"Have some cawfee an' crullers," he invited hospitably. "Been makin' the crullers myse'f today. Too gosh-awful wet to do anythin' outside." He dropped some twisted dough into a pan of fat, bubbling over the fire, fished out other, browned pieces, and piled them on a tin plate. "Pour some of that honey over 'em. Robbed a bee tree, here just t'other day. Sweetenin' makes ye feel mellow, even on a day like this."

Clay ate, and while he did so, his host, starved for companionship, talked, and voiced complaint.

"Dang funny thing," he growled. "Here mebby an hour ago, three fellers rode past, same way you're headin'. Didn't stop to say howdy, even. No way to do. Know why, though." He scowled darkly. "Got a glimp of the brands on their horses. Circle 7. Just as well pleased then they didn't stop."

He slapped fresh crullers on to Clay's plate, voiced question.

"But what'n tunket would they be doin', travelin' so far from the ranch, on a day like this? Up to some mischief, I bet a cookie."

Clay made no comment, but he was of the same opinion. His hunch was that the trio were on the lookout for him, riding hereabouts at about the same that he should be along as well. But if so, why had they waited this long before taking action? It had been a lonely trail all day, and the fact that they had passed here an hour ago and were still traveling was hard to figure out.

He stood up, and an idea came to him. There might be no significance in this trio being off here just when he was coming along, but it was better to take no chances that could be avoided.

"You still got your horse in the shed, Baldy?" he asked.

"Ye mean that ornery little buckskin? Yeah. Standin' in there, gettin' fat an' sassy. Tried to kick the hat off my head, only yesterdiddy. Lucky thing, I wasn't wearin' no hat at the time. Ought to be rid more."

"How about lettin' me take him?" Clay asked. "I'll tame him down a little, and leave this black in his place till I come around again."

"Be a good idea," Baldy agreed promptly. "He needs some of the orneriness run off him."

A few minutes later, Clay pulled out again, this time on the buckskin. For a mile or so the cayuse was full of tricks and buck-jumping, then he settled down to steady traveling. There might be nothing to this, of course. On the other hand, if that crew from the Circle 7 should be waiting in ambush, for some rider on a black horse, then a man on a buckskin, with the rain making it hard to distinguish faces for more than a few feet away, might mean the

difference between a fighting chance and none at all.

The day ended with early darkness, and he managed to make a fairly comfortable camp. Morning found no let-up in the storm. By now, the ground was soggy, muddy, and the thirsty earth had been filled to repletion and was running over. He was hours behind schedule, and traveling, slipping and sliding, was a weary job. He had planned to reach Cottonwood Creek by mid-forenoon, but at this rate, it would be night again.

IT WAS impossible to see far. Off a few yards, objects were hazy and indistinct. And then, all at once, a horse and rider loomed wetly before him, pressing closer. Clay recognized one of McNulty's men at the same instant that the gunman had a good look at him, and his hand flipped out from under his slicker, clutching a revolver—one of the new model Colt's six-shooters.

But Clay had had the same amount of warning, and his own shot jarred the silence an instant faster. He heard the whoom of the other gun, the two reports blasting together, saw the other horse rear and plunge, and knew that his own bullet had been close, but a miss. Then, from behind him, another gun took up the savage barking, and his buckskin, still eager to go from the long days in the barn, plunged ahead.

Clay heard the gunman shouting to his companions, cursing, exclaiming about the buckskin, saying something about a black horse. And Clay knew that his hunch had paid off. In the storm, the day before, they must have lain in ambush for him, but seeing a man pass on a buskskin, when they were watching for a black horse, had been undecided until it was past, and after that the early dark had come to his aid before they could find him.

Now it was show-down. Another shot was thin and sharp on the wet air, like the slap of a hand, and it was close—near enough that he heard the buzzing whine of the lead near his ear. Looking back, he saw the trio who had passed Baldy's place the day before, recognized Shave McNulty himself, and guessed that it was his shot which had come so close.

He turned to see how close they were, and was in time to see that McNulty had gained a little. In time, too, to observe that the boss of Circle 7 had holstered his six-gun and dragged out a rifle from saddle-sheath. If it was an old muzzle-loader, it wasn't much to be feared. If, on the other hand, it was a percussion gun, such as used by the army, Clay knew that it was the most accurate military rifle in the world.

The thought twisted in his mind, even as he looked—and fire belched from the muzzle of the gun as McNulty steadied it. Something hit Clay like the blow of a hammer, pounding over his heart, and he had time for the tail-end of a gasping thought—that this was an army rifle!

Then tearing pain was driving through him, darkness, red-slashed, sweeping down over him. Here, at last, was the thick brush and trees that he had hoped to reach—and as his horse plunged, terrified, beneath low-sweeping branches, they reached out hungrily and dragged at the swaying figure in the saddle, so that presently the buckskin still ran, but riderless now.

17

BUB WONDERED, a little uneasily, if Goodman was competent with mules. Getting up the mountain, on a day like this, might be a tough job, for a man who didn't know mules any too well.

And there had been more or less storm for three days—though he divided the weather roughly into good or bad, and some of it wasn't so bad as others. Still, it all affected such transportation—

The mules were his responsibility, or so it seemed to Bub. He was a partner in this new joint freight and express business, but he was furnishing the mules, and they were what he knew. Clay wouldn't be around to see to things like that—he was too far

away. So, if there was any trouble, it was up to him, wasn't it?

He thought of speaking to the alcalde about it, or to Lou. But they'd be likely just to raise objections to his doing anything, and if a man was old enough to be a partner in a business, he was old enough to do things that needed doing. With his mind made up, Bud saddled a horse and rode out of camp.

The notion that the mules might be delayed for any reason other than the inexperience of the driver, or the weather, did not occur to him. For his own part, he liked mules, just the same as Uncle Ty had liked them. But he had long since acquired his uncle's philosophy that men who liked and understood mules were a class apart, and rare. You had to have the gift, and most people simply didn't possess it. Most folks didn't like mules.

Bub rode down the steep, twisting trail, his horse sliding and slipping, and gave no more thought to that, or to the sheer heights often rising on one side, or the dizzy drop-offs below on the others, than if he had been on the level ground. He'd seen folks—grown men, at that—who got dizzy and made a lot of fuss about the trail, but that was beyond Bub's understanding. There was simply nothing to get excited about, that he could see.

Nor were there any fresh tracks in the mud, anywhere. Which meant that the mules hadn't gotten this far at all. He rode, beginning to get a little worried. At this rate, by the time he did find them, it would still be dark before they could get up the hill to camp. It was a lucky thing that he'd started out to see about things. Only, he wished now that he'd told Lou. Women were funny, that way. Apt to worry, without reason. And he didn't want her to worry about him.

Down here, it was warmer, and there was no snow in the air. There was still a faint mist of rain, after he had gotten through the clouds. It had been foggy a good part of the way down, but now he was below the clouds. Off at the side was where the trail turned off, winding on around the slope of Outpost, and if you followed it, twisting through the trees, up and down and across gullies, you soon found yourself on Circle 7.

Now, however, he glanced at the road which wound off there, partly from habit, partly because that road showed the ruts made by wagon wheels. And it had been a long time, up on Outpost, since he'd seen a wagon. Sure be nice if there was only some way that, as freighters, they could figure to get a wagon up the mountain—

HE STOPPED, staring, a little incredulous. Then he was urging his horse ahead, off on that road, not understanding, indignant and angry and puzzled, all at once. Just disappearing in the haze were the rumps of two or three mules—heading on that road to Circle 7. And Bub had seen those mules too many times to be mistaken. They were his mules, and if they were heading that way, it was no wonder that they weren't coming on up the trail.

Now he could see, from the tracks, that a lot of them had gone this way, probably the whole pack train. Bub rounded the bend, and there they were, just ahead.

There was something else, too, and belatedly, it occurred to Bub that maybe he was being a little headlong, that he might be running into trouble. For there was trouble here. He saw three or four of the Circle 7 crew, riding along, driving the mules. And there were two other saddled horses, with men riding them, and one of them was Goodman. Bub had never seen the other man but it needed only a second look to see that they were riding with their hands tied behind their backs, and their feet tied under their horses.

Here was trouble, all right, but not of the kind that he had been looking for. And by the time that he had seen this much, the others had seen him, too.

Someone called excitedly. Then a couple of them swung their horses

around and started toward him. Bub had seen enough. He'd blundered, when any scout who knew beans should have had sense enough to proceed like an Indian until he saw what was going on, without being seen. The thought was a bitter one. The Circle 7 had taken Goodman a prisoner, along with that other man, and they were stealing the mules and the freight.

What he needed to do was to get back up the mountain to Five Corners and report this to Peg Leg and the miners. And they'd make mighty short work of these buggers that figured they could interfere with freight coming to Five Corners.

He heard the whang of a gun, and scrooched lower in the saddle. So they were shooting at him, eh? He wished he'd thought to hunt up Uncle Ty's gun and bring it along—but the notion of anything like this just hadn't occurred to him. There was another shot, but he'd be around a bend in a couple more jumps, and out of sight—

But they'd have to do better than that. He wasn't going to be scared into quitting that easy. Maybe they'd really try to hit him, when they saw that he wasn't going to stop. Let 'em try it! He'd soon be back up in the fog, and then—

He was out of sight, around the bend in the road. And then, before he knew it, somebody was there in the road, bocking his path, grabbing the reins of his horse and bringing it to a plunging halt, and Bub realized again, too late, that the shots had probably really been signals.

This hombre, who was trying to capture him, was Hawe, the dried-up, apolegetic little gunman whom Clay had made such a fool of, on the day of the trial. He was holding to the horse, and Bub leaned across in wild desperation and butted at him like a goat. His head sank solidly into Hawe's stomach, bringing a whooshing grunt from him, and Bub felt Hawe's grip on the reins relax, and tried to jerk away.

He almost made it. Not quite. For now, with sudden wild savagery, Hawe brought the gun that he had held in one hand, slamming down viciously on Bub's head. Bub felt the slashing blow of the barrel, and then pain was a ball of fire in his skull, and everything was going black, just as though night had come all in a moment. He tried to fight against it, and knew that he was falling, and then the darkness had him.

18

LOU WENT outside, calling for Bub.

She called, and then called again. Boy-like, of course, he had wandered off. She was about to go back inside, when one of the miners came past.

"You lookin' for Bub, Miss Lou?" he asked. "Saw him headin' off down the trail a leetle while back, on his horse. Takin' a ride, I guess."

He nodded and went on. Lou went back inside, suddenly uneasy. It would be just like Bub to set out to look for the mules and, hardy and independent as he was, to say nothing to anyone.

Ordinarily, she knew, he was completely self-reliant, as well able to look after himself in this country as any man. But these were not ordinary times. There was danger abroad—she could almost feel it. It wasn't likely to involve a twelve-year old boy. Still—

Slipping on a coat, Lou crossed in turn to the livery stable. She was quite capable of saddling a horse for herself, but the stable-man was anxious to please. Presently she rode off, turning down the mountain trail as well, noting the tracks in the mud where Bub had ridden.

Somewhere, far below, there came a small sound, small but sharp, and then another. Lou caught her breath. Those sounded like gun-shots. Now they were echoing, broken, muffled, as though the fog resented even this intrusion. And then silence.

It couldn't be that those shots had anything to do with Bub. But he was off down below there, somewhere—and his uncle had been murdered

down there. Lou discovered that she was urging her horse to a faster pace, despite the slippery trail.

Almost unconsciously, she found herself observing the tracks made by Bub's horse, clearly outlined in the mud. The cayuse had been shod, at some time during spring or summer, and one shoe seemed to be a little loose. It left a different, distinct mark of its own in the mud, as compared to those of the other three feet.

This did not really register upon her conscious mind until she came to where there were, suddenly, a great many fresh tracks in the mud. As though a whole caravan had passed here. Stopping, she studied them more intently, realizing all at once that she had come a long way down the trail, and still without sight of Bub.

These other tracks were somehow a little different, and then she knew the answer. They were mule tracks! They had come up the trail this far, from the valley below, then had turned off on this side-road. And she was suddenly sure where it led to. The Circle 7, of course.

Looking more closely, she saw that Bub's trail, too, turned that way. All of the tracks led in, and none came out again. The loose horseshoe made that easy enough to tell, even among the more churned-up trail.

For an instant she hesitated, a queer panic gripping her, undecided whether to go on, or not. But Bub had been brave enough to follow this trail, and the mules had gone in here—whatever that might mean. Then, too, there had been those shots. She couldn't go away now, not and leave Bub alone.

Lou leaned over, stroking the glossy neck of her horse, speaking in its ear.

"We'd better follow, hadn't we? And see what's going on?"

The horse nodded its head, as if agreement. Then trotted ahead, following the trail.

19

SHAVE McNULTY was in a high good humor. He had listened with grim amusement to the recital of how, his other two men having drugged Goodman's coffee, they had been captured in turn by Mort, but had managed to give him what remained of the same coffee. There had been a heated argument then, one of the two insisting that he had been in favor of killing the two of them and being done with it, while his companion, with a squeamish stomach and uneasy dreams of hang-ropes, had been equally insistent that both be kept alive and brought to the ranch for McNulty to dispose of.

"Glad you did," McNulty had agreed. "We can turn 'em loose—later. They don't amount to anything."

Then the good luck had really begun to run. It had shown itself in the person of the kid, Ty Turner's nephew. He had nearly licked Hawe in his effort to escape, but Hawe, clipping him over the head with his gun-butt, had brought him in, and stopped what might have been a serious threat to McNulty's plans.

It was all right for Five Corners to know what was happening—but in his own good time and method. Now was the time, however, and McNulty carefully composed a note, with the help of one of his men who had been so steeped in books during his youth that everyone called him the Professor. This, McNulty gave to another hand called Notches, and dispatched him up the mountain with instructions to give it into the hand of Lou Hunter, and no one else.

It was full night by the time Notches reached the camp, which suited him perfectly. Most of the clouds were gone at last, and stars gave a little light, but not too much. It was too good an opportunity to miss, to drift across to the saloon and have a quick one, before delivering his message.

It was after the sixth or seventh treatment that someone asked him

what he wanted, rousing him from a half-stupor. Notches blinked at his questioner, then growled an answer.

"I'm here—lookin' for Miss Lou Hunter. Got a—a message for her."

Things began to move, then. Questioned as to why he didn't give it to her, he explained, quite logically that he couldn't find her. Investigation soon disclosed that no one had seen her since during the afternoon, and that she was not at home, nor apparently in town. By then, with interest fast rising, the attendant at the livery stable volunteered what he knew about her leaving for a horseback ride.

NOTCHES HAD been temporarily forgotten as excitement mounted. Now interest swung back to him. This time, it was Peg Leg himself who did the questioning.

"What'd ye want of Mss Lou?" he demanded.

"Wanted to—to give her a letter," Notches explained, trying to round up straying thoughts.

"Ye got a letter for her? Then give it here."

Notches shook his head, unsteadily.

"Nope. Can't do it. The boss, he tol' me—give it to her. Not to nobody else."

"Give it here," Peg Leg repeated. "Or I'll string you up to the Tree for the rest of the night."

The threat was sufficient. Sobering a little, Notches handed over the note. Peg Leg scowled at it, holding it up to the light, then looked at the assembled crowd. Though it was long past their usual bed time, not a miner had sought his bunk, since the news that Lou was missing had spread.

"Dang it," Peg Leg said peevishly. "Where's Bub? Thunderin' powder, everybody knows I can't read. Who can read this?"

Several volunteers pushed forward. Peg Leg gave it to Tip Noble.

"Read it out," he instructed, and a hush fell.

"*Dear Miss Lou,*" the note ran, in the diction of the Professor. "*Do not be alarmed. But, if you want things to work out properly, you must do just as I say. And do not tell anyone—least of all Peg Leg. Nor fool yourself with the notion that you can turn to anyone like Clay Nyman for help.*

"*This is impossible, since Nyman is dead. Bub is at the Circle 7—and so are the mules. If you want to save the boy, and see things work out right, come to the ranch, at once. There will be no danger for you or the boy, if you do. But if you tell anyone of this, Bub will soon be as dead as Clay Nyman.*"

It was signed, "*Shave McNulty.*"

A moment's hush followed the reading of it. Then a roar went up, everyone talking at once. Peg Leg shouted them to silence, looking about grimly.

"This ain't no time to go cacklin' like a lot of hens," he reminded. "You ain't laid no eggs—yit! Seems like Bub chased off, boy-like, and she must have followed him. Looks like he went and got hisself caught. Likely, since she ain't returned, the same thing's happened to her . . . What's that ag'in, about Clay Nyman?"

Noble re-read the passage.

"Dead, eh? If he is, there'll be others," the alcalde said grimly. He looked toward the cringing, now nearly sobered bearer of the message. "What do you know about this?" he barked.

Notches, it developed, did not know much. He was able to tell how the mules, and their drivers, had been captured, and of the subsequent capture of Bub. Beyond that, he knew nothing. It was news to him that Clay Nyman was dead.

"Lock him up," Peg Leg ordered. "Where he'll be handy if we want him later." He swung back to the crowd.

"Looks like we're long overdue with payin' a visit to the Circle 7," he said. "Everybody that wants to come, get ready. We'll take it easy, so's to hit there just about daylight. Get yore guns!"

There was a prompt response. And it appeared that everybody in Five Corners intended to be in on that visit. Half an hour later, except for

the hapless Notches, locked away in a cabin, Five Corners had all the look of a ghost camp.

20

DARKNESS was not far off now, and Lou welcomed it as an ally. The fact that the mules had swung in on this road leading to Circle 7, that Bub too had gone that way and had not returned, together with what she already knew of Shave McNulty, suggested that caution would be in order.

She had gone a couple of miles when she saw the scattered beam of lights ahead, and knew that she was in sight of the old half-feudal, castle-like house which had once dominated the Rancho of the Seven Circles.

She was close enough now to hear men talking, and she saw that they were gathered about the bunkhouse, smoking, relaxed after a days' work and with supper eaten. Convinced by now that there were no dogs, she worked closer, keeping to the deeper shadows, to where it was easier to hear.

Their words held nothing of interest. It was as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened here at all. And then there was a stir, and she saw that McNulty himself was coming, and the others fell silent, watching him, a little warily it seemed to her.

McNULTY STOPPED, facing them, his legs spread wide apart. The light from a lantern, with a candle stuck in it, which was hung above the doorway, reflected redly on his hair, around the edges of his pushed-back hat. A slow, rather unpleasant smile widened his face.

"Things are breakin' right," he said. "We've got the kid here, and with any luck, the girl 'll be here 'fore long, when she gets my message. It couldn't be better."

Someone stirred, voiced an uneasy question.

"But what if the miners hear about this?"

McNulty snorted disdainfully.

"Let 'em! We'll have hostages, won't we? And if they want to stir up trouble, and get plumb to the boilin' point—that'll suit me just fine. They can act one of two ways. Either way'll suit me." He did not simplify that, but stared truculently for a moment, and his tone changed.

"None of you have gone soft on me before—or yellah. You all ain't aimin' to now, are you?"

"We are right behind you, boss, whatever you decide on," the Professor spoke up. "You know that."

"You should be," McNulty said, more mildly. "It's paid, ain't it—paid big? Well, when this works out, it'll make the rest seem like chicken feed."

He turned away, and his spurs made a faintly musical jingle as he moved toward the big house. Lou followed him, like a shadow, considering what she had heard, and what it might mean. Right now, they were totally unsuspicious of trouble here, and that was a big advantage. But at the door of the house, McNulty was stopping to talk for a minute to some one else.

"Not much chance of trouble for a while yet, but we don't want to take no chances," he was saying. "Post a couple of men to watch, and change 'em about midnight. Tell the rest of the boys just to take their boots off, and keep guns handy—just in case!"

"I'll tend to it. What about Goodman an' his friend?"

"Leave 'em locked in the tool shed. They don't count. After it's settled, we'll turn them loose."

The door slammed as McNulty went on, into the house, and receding footsteps indicated where the other man was going away. Lou stood there, shivering a little. She knew what she had to do, for she had a strong feeling that Bub would be held somewhere in this house. And to prowl about in it was the last thing that she desired.

She wished, strongly, that Clay was here. He would know what to do. But it was partly on Clay's account that she must do this. There was a light in another part of the house now. She started to circle to a win-

dow, and the big, wide, ancient porch was in the way. As she set foot on it, grasping at the dark rail, something moved and squawked.

Lou stood frozen, panicky for an instant, before she realized that it was a hen, roosting there, and disturbed in the gloom. Nothing else moved. however, so she went on. Now she could stand back from the window and look in.

But though a candle was burning on a table, the room seemed to be empty. Then McNulty entered the room, picked it up, and went out. Circling again, Lou could hear voices, and one of them, defiant but a trifle unsteady, was that of Bub.

"You can't get away with this, McNulty," he said. "When Clay gets back, he'll sure get you!"

McNulty's voice held a mocking note.

"You talk big, kid," he said. "I reckon you're whistlin' in the dark to keep your courage up. That's all right. I don't aim to hurt you—just so you don't bother. But don't count on Clay. He's dead."

Sharp pain seemed to stab at Lou's heart at the words, and Bub's voice, after a moment, was curiously breathless.

"Dead? I don't believe it! You're lyin!"

"I don't care whether you believe it or not," McNulty assured him. "I'm merely tellin' you." The casualness with which he conveyed it was far more convincing than argument. "You do as I say, and there won't be any trouble. If you don't it won't hinder me, just make it that much harder for you. Give me your word not to act up, and I'll untie you."

"You go to hell," Bub raved. "I wouldn't promise you nothin'. Besides, when the miners hear of what's going on, do you think they'll stand for this? They'll come down here an clean you out—the whole kit an' bilin' of them!"

"I'm rather hoping they do try something like that," McNulty agreed. "Nothing would suit me better. Since you like to be tied up, that's all right with me. But it won't be half as comfortable as the other way."

Nodding with a grim joviality, he left the room again, taking the candle with him. Lou waited, until she heard him moving in another part of the house, then she tried the window and managed to raise it.

"Bub!" she whispered.

"MISS LOU? Golly!" Bub's whisper, in return, was startled, incredulous. "What you doin' here?"

"I came after you," Lou said matter-of-factly. She was through the window by now, and she crossed the floor to where Bub lay on an old blanket, his hands tied in front of him, uncomfortably tight, as she could see, feet tied together as well. "Don't talk," she warned, as she fumbled with the knots.

"I got a knife in my pocket," Bub whispered. "I don't think they took it."

Breathlessly, she searched his pockets, found it, and slashed the bonds. That was a lot easier than trying to loosen them, but Bub had been tied so tightly that his circulation was bad, though that had not worried his captors. He had made no complaint, had remained defiant to McNulty, though Lou knew now that he must have been in considerable pain. He could hardly stand, even with her assistance, and he clenched his teeth at the rush of returning blood.

"I'll be—all right, in a minute," he gritted. "I was—just about ready to call him back—an' give in. Sure glad—to see you. But you shouldn't have come."

"You're just like all the men," Lou laughed at him. "You think a woman can't do anything—even if you blunder into trouble and we have to get you out."

"Well, I sure did, and you're gettin' me out, all right," Bub conceded. "I'd of licked Hawe an' got away, only he slugged me over the head with his gun. Knocked me cold for a spell. They've got the mules," he added.

"We won't bother about the mules

now," Lou said tersely, at the window. "Let's get away ourselves."

Once outside again, in the night, she drew a deeper breath. Bub was able to move more readily now, and they went as fast as possible, but cautiously, toward where she had left her horse. One horse could carry double. The thing to do was to get away, get back and tell the alcalde about this. She refused to think about what McNulty had said concerning Clay. If that was so, nothing else mattered much—but she wouldn't believe it—not yet.

She searched in the brush, at first a little bewildered, then in dismay. Ths was the place where she had left her horse, tied fast. There was no doubt of that. The still soft ground had been trampled, it had eaten off a little bark on some of the bushes.

But it wasn't here now. Then, as her apprehension began to mount, she seemed to freeze at a voice behind her.

"Don't try nothin', either of you. We're all around you. Reckon the boss'll be right glad to see yuh, Miss —and to welcome the prodigal back, sort of, Bub. An' next time," Hawe added mockingly, as men closed in around them. "Don't forget that a hoss tied off this way is apt to get plumb restless, and when there's others close enough in a corral to call to, to do some whinnyin'. That attracts attention! Not, of course, that there'll be any next time that you'll need to worry about!"

21

LOU FELT a little sick, at the ease with which they had been captured. Things had seemed to be going so well, and then, to walk into a trap that way! She glanced at Bub, and saw that he had his fists clenched, his face screwed up, very close to tears, but very determined.

"Don't you dast hurt her, any of you!" he said. "If—if you do, I'll kill you!"

"We ain't aimin' to hurt yuh none, either of you," Hawe said good-naturedly. "Why, the boss'll be that glad to see you, I shouldn't wonder if he'll want to kiss yuh!"

There was nothing to do but be herded back to the house, and McNulty, who had already received word of their capture, chose to be very pleasant.

"Come right in," he said. "Awfully nice of you to come callin'. I did invite you to come to Circle 7 sometime, didn't I, Lou? Well, you folks just make yourselves right at home. You're as welcome as beefsteak the mornin' after Easter!"

He was effusive, half-mocking, but apparently a little puzzled as well. Presently he asked the question, bluntly.

"What I don't understand is how you could get here so soon, after gettin' my note."

"Note?" Lou repeated. "I didn't get any note."

It was soon ironed out, how he had sent a messenger after Bub was captured, but she had left camp without knowing about it. McNulty scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Main thing is, you're here," he said. "So it don't matter too much . . But Notches ought to've been back before this . . . If that fool goes to drinkin'—"

He swung abruptly, paused at the doorway.

"Like I say, make yourselves at home," he said. "There's a couple rooms on in there. Nobody'll bother you—but there'll be somebody around to keep an eye out so that you won't be abusin' our hospitality by tryin' to run off again!"

On that heavily ironic note, he left the room. There were two other rooms beyond the one they were in, both opening off it. But both of them, as they discovered, though comfortable enough, were decidedly old-fashioned in one respect—or, Lou decided, these might have been rooms for a girl raised in the old Spanish traditon.

There were iron bars over the windows. And whether these had been designed for keeping senoritas in, or keeping importunate suitors out, the result was the same now.

"I acted like a blame tenderfoot," Bub said bitterly. "You're new to this

country, but I plumb should a known better. I'm ashamed of myself, Miss Lou. And now I've gone and got you captured, too."

"It wasn't your fault," Lou protested. "And besides, I don't think we've anything to worry about—not now, anyway. The—the thing that worries me—he says that Clay is dead. Do you—do you suppose that's true?"

Bud shook his head staunchly.

"Naw! They're bluffin'—or mebby he's fooled 'em. But he knows his way around. He'll turn up."

There wasn't much comfort in that, but Lou took what she could in it, and in the knowledge that a search was sure to be made for them, by the aroused miners. Escape, for the moment, seemed to be out of the question, and she was tired. Bub had gone into one of the rooms, insisting that he intended to just sit down for a little while, but she saw that he was stretched out on the bed, sleeping heavily. Tired as she was, Lou dozed a little in the other room.

SHE STARTED up, frightened, confused, then was aware of voices somewhere outside — excited voices, which held a note of uneasiness as well.

"I tell you the whole danged camp's headin' this way, boss," someone was saying urgently. "Looked to me like every miner at Five corners was in the bunch. They got hold of Notches, an' read the letter you wrote. Now they're on the war-path for fair."

There was a moment of silence—a moment which dragged until the speaker cut in again, his voice ragged.

"Can't yuh understand, boss? They're comin'—and they'll aim to wipe us right off the earth—"

"Take it easy," McNulty murmured, and his own voice was curiously calm, though with an underlying thread of excitement in it. "You're sure the whole camp's comin?"

"Don't look to me like there could be anybody left in it. I got a look at the bunch, and then I moved right along, gettin' here. I was scared."

"Well, get over it," McNulty advised him. "Things are workin' out fine. Not quite the way I'd figgered on, first, but mebby even better. Let 'em come!"

"And kill us when they get here?" another man demanded then. "It's time to start travelin'. What can we do against that bunch?"

"Plenty—when we get ready," McNulty assured them. "Keep your shirts on, and I'll show you. Everybody get ready, with horses saddled an' guns handy—but keep quiet! We likely won't have to fire a shot, but we'll be ready, just in case."

His confidence was having its effect. Some of the panicky crew who had been gathering at the news, moved away to do as he said. The first speaker said something more, which Lou did not catch, then McNulty answered again.

"We'll be movin', now—and take it easy, so they don't guess what we're up to."

"You mean, pull out an' let them have everything? If they don't find us here, they'll burn things to the ground."

"Maybe you'd rather make a fight of it?" McNulty asked sardonically.

Apparently there was no answer to that. But now someone did remember the prisoners.

"We goin' off without them? They'd be mighty handy as hostages."

"They'd be under foot—now," McNulty retorted. "There was a time when I wanted them for that, but I've got somethin' better now. Our luck's runnin' strong. Come on."

LOU COULD hear the creak of leather and jingle of bits then as the whole crew mounted and rode away in the heavy blackness which preceded dawn. She could see a faint hint of the coming day in the east now, but for another quarter of an hour they would be well sheltered by the night. And one thing seemed plain. They had actually pulled out, leaving Bub and herself unguarded, and the Circle 7 as well

That McNulty had some countertrick up his sleeve, she could not doubt, but what it might be baffled her as much as it did his own crew.

What could a score of men, even though they were trained gunmen, hope to do against hundreds of infuriated miners?

She awakened Bub, and they made their way outdoors again, finding that the building really had been deserted. Bub, still half-asleep, tried to puzzle it out.

"Somethin' mighty funny here," he said. "But what's he plannin'? He must be crazy."

"He's a long way from that," Lou denied. "He's crafty. We'll have to find the others and tell them. Maybe they can move fast enough to stop them yet, whatever they're up to."

"There's somebody now," Bub said suddenly, more alert. "See, that shadder over that—it moved! We better call."

They did so, and a moment later some of the miners came crowding up, exclaiming anxiously.

"Here she is, Peg Leg. Bub too." Tip Noble shouted. "We found 'em."

Peg Leg hobbled up, excitedly.

"Thunderin' powder, but I'm glad to see the both of you," he declared. "But where'n tunket are them hombres? Have they got so much lower'n a snake's belly that they've went and crawled in holes?"

"They pulled out, a few minutes ago," Lou explained, and related what she had overheard. "I don't know what they're up to, but it's something."

"Mebby they aimed for her to hear that," another miner suggested. "Might be they're hidin' out, hopin' we'll scatter to look for 'em."

"Reckon we'll have to hunt 'em down, Peg Leg," Noble suggested. "They've seen what they was up against, and scattered. But we ain't goin' to let 'em get away with it, are we?"

"They haven't done that," Lou said. "What it is, I don't know, but McNulty had some plan in mind—something a lot bigger than the Circle 7 even—"

SHE BROKE OFF suddenly, staring at the alcalde.

"You left the camp deserted, didn't you?" she gasped.

Peg Leg nodded, then yelled for the horses, as the same idea hit him with equal impact.

"We're a set o' blitherin' fools," he yelped. "You men that've got horses, ride—but watch out for a trap! The rest of us'll follow—but I reckon we'll be too late!" he added under his breath.

"What do you mean?" Bud demanded breathlessly. "How?"

"They'll have the camp, by now," Peg Leg groaned. "And two-three men with guns can hold that trail against the whole kit an' bilin' of us!"

Tanned, bearded faces were beginning to blanch as the others began to understand the significance of this. The mounted men had already swept ahead on horseback, out of sight, but the rest of them were following as fast as they could, Peg Leg making hard work of it, swaying and lurching as he attempted to go faster. Then he slowed, mopping at his face with a big blue bandana.

"Ain't no use of gettin' excited, after the barn's stole," he grunted. "Which is what we're doin."

He was plainly pessimistic, as he considered the possibilities of the rancher's coup. The only way in or out was by the trail, and that would be easy to hold. Of course, there might be other expedients, but they did not hold much promise.

Presently one of the men on horseback came riding back to report.

"They're up there, all right," he grated. "Gathered right above that narrow spot in the trail, where there's a big drop-off on the one side, and big overhang above."

Some of the other horsemen were returning as well, reporting that they had been warned not to try coming any farther. Since two or three guns could wipe the pitilessly exposed trail clean of any who might try, the others had halted, a little way back from the danger spot, and now they were waiting for Peg Leg, since McNulty had sent word that he wanted to talk to him.

"Reckon I'll have to ride," the alcalde groaned. "Get there quicker, I guess. If I'm all in one piece when I

do. Never did have no fondness for cayuses. Man was split in two half way to start with, and that's plenty. They like to do it the rest of the way. But if I hafta, I hafta."

CLOSE TO THE top, they came to where the other horsemen were waiting, angry but baffled, trying to decide what to do.

Some were arguing that it would be better to rush the defenders above, at whatever cost, and get it settled quickly, but cooler heads had prevailed. They could see no one, but McNulty's mocking voice floated down as Peg Leg came in sight.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Alcalde? I thought you had just a wooden leg, but I guess it's a wooden head too, eh? Really, there's no need of comin' up here. You might as well go on back. You seemed to want to trade, Circle 7 for Five Corners. So that's all right with me. You've got the ranch—and we've got the camp."

"You won't have it long," someone growled.

"No?" McNulty sounded more jovial than before. "We'll do the fair thing, and buy you boys out—all your claims, at a fair price—say, mebby, fifty thousand for the whole camp." Then, as a roar of shocked protest went up, he went on.

"It'll be that—or nothing! If you try comin' on up after us, we've got a charge of powder fixed, and we'll blow down the overhang! It won't take much to take the whole thing to sliding. That'll knock off a chunck of trail—and every one of you that gets in the way with it! Take yore choice!"

Lou saw the dismay in Peg Leg's face now.

"Looks like they got us," he gasped. "If he does that, with the trail swept away and winter comin' on, we couldn't get no supplies in to live out the winter, nohow! But with us cut off from reachin' them, they could hold up there, and have plenty to last their crew till spring."

22

CLAY WINCED moving a little with returning consciousness. He lay for a moment, gasping with the pain of it, then became aware that it was dark night, wet and cold, with rain still pelting into his upturned face.

Memory came back—how McNulty and a couple of his gunmen had jumped him, of the chase, and how, as he turned to look back, McNulty had fired the rifle—and that was the last that he could remember. There had been a moment of nightmare then, of tearing pain above his heart, of blackness, and it had seemed to him that it must be death, that the bullet had passed through his heart.

Then his questing fingers found something else, and he began to understand. The lucky piece!

The bullet, hitting the piece with such force as to dent it, had slammed the whole chunk of metal against him, pounding his heart hard enough to knock him unconscious, and he had remained so for hours. And the effect of that bruise was the big swelling now, the soreness to the touch.

But it hadn't been quite bad enough to kill him, though close enough. Altogether, it had worked out right to save his life. Tumbling from the saddle, in the haze of the rain, hidden in deep brush, they had probably not even seen where he fell, but had kept on after his running horse. By the time they came close enough to discover that the saddle was empty, it had evidently been impossible to find him. Most likely they hadn't bothered to look very hard, confident that a rifle shot which would knock him out of the saddle would have killed him.

He found wood which was dry enough to burn. By the time it was gone, he was pretty well warmed and dried himself. Stretching out, he slept.

BY MORNING, when he awoke, stiff and cold, it had at last stopped raining, at least down here,

Off toward Outpost it looked as though the storm might be keeping on.

He still had a big swelling above his heart, but it was going down a little, and his side did not pain him so much as it had done at first.

He was on foot now, and hungry. There were a few berries, which helped a little, but not much. The best thing to do, he decided, since it was a long way to help in any direction, was to head back for Five Corners. Once he got there, and told the miners what had been going on, and enlisted their help, there would be a long-delayed settlement with Shave McNulty and his whole Circle 7 setup. The nearest food that he was likely to find was at the cabin where McNulty had first tried to kill him in the night, then had waited later with another man to waylay him. Fortunately, it was only a few miles away now.

Reaching it, Clay found the supplies that he had cached there, untouched. He cooked and ate a good meal, putting up a lunch for later use, then plodded doggedly ahead. It would take him, he knew, all of that day and a good part of the next to reach Five Corners.

Finally he was close to the trail up Outpost, and he drew a breath of relief. He was dog-tired now, but he felt good. Most all of the swelling had disappeared, and though his side was still sore and black and blue, it didn't hurt him to breathe any more. He might as well finish the job while he was about it, and have breakfast with Lou.

Thought of that lent him new strength. And then, off in the night, he saw something else—a mounting column of crimson which rose flaringly, dimming the stars above, an overcast of heavy black smoke at its edges.

THAT FIRE must come from off at Circle 7. And only a building would be likely to burn that way.

Which meant that things must be happening. Now, as he hurried again, his weariness almost forgotten in the grip of excitement, he saw that there were horsemen on the road ahead of him, and only a few words which he overheard were necessary to tell him that these were riders from Circle 7.

They had seen the fire as well, and were discussing it angrily, then heading, not very fast, back up the trail again. And from what they had said Clay was able to understand pretty well not only what had happened, but what Shave McNulty was doing.

Most of the crew of Circle 7 was already up above, in Five Corners. It had been deserted en masse by the miners, descending on Circle 7, and McNulty and his crew had simply moved in in turn. Now these two or three men were keeping watch and finally woke up to what was happening, these gunmen would simply move back up the trail, ahead of them, until they had joined the others at the overhang.

Which meant that he coudn't keep on, up the trail. He could head off for the ranch and join the miners, and get a horse. He was strongly tempted, then decided against it. Better to stay dead a little longer. That way, nobody would be looking for him or counting on him.

He had already grasped the bold stroke that McNulty was trying, and its almost certain chances of success. Unless one man whom no one was trying to guard against, could find a way to spoil that plan.

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HERE, IN THE full light of day, Shave McNulty was making his big play, doing it boldly. As Peg Leg stepped out into sight up above.

"Mebby we'd better palaver some more, Peg Leg," he suggested. "Now you know where I am." Discreetly then, he dropped down behind a small boulder, out of sight from those down below.

"The powder's set, and the fuse ready to light," he added. "And I've got some of them new sulphur

matches handy for lightin' it. Now, are you ready to talk turkey?"

"You seem to be runnin' off at the mouth," the alcalde said with asperity. "Go ahead."

"Well, I've told you a'ready," McNulty growled. "We'll give you fifty thousand, gold, for signin' over all your claims an' property—everything in Five Corners to us. And you can have Circle 7 in the bargain."

Peg Leg wet his lips. On the surface, it sounded like a fairly generous offer, since Circle 7 was worth quite a lot. But the ranch could be discounted, since McNulty had taken it by force and illegal possession in the first place, and could give no title to it which would hold in any court. And some day, not far off, as law and order advanced, it would be necessary to prove an honest title.

McNulty knew that, and aimed to trade nothing for something—and this time, to get legal title to the claim. As for the cash which he offered for them, most of that money, Peg Leg knew, was gold which already belonged to the miners, which the invaders had found in camp since taking it over.

In any case, it would mean a price of only a few hundred dollars per claim, for property worth well into the thousands. It was robbery, plain and simple, yet done under a guise which would give a cloak of legality.

"Think we're fools?" Peg Leg yelped.

"What else?" McNulty retorted contemptously. "You better make up yore mind. You've no choice."

There was too much truth in that for comfort. If they didn't take it, the chances of getting anything at all were slim indeed. But an angry growl was going up from the men behind him, and Peg Leg agreed with it. There were times when it was better to die fighting for the right, if die you must, than submit. The odds were long— but there was always a fighting chance.

"Come on, boys," Peg Leg said grimly, and started forward. With a cheer, the others surged to join him.

"You fools," McNulty yelled. "I'm lightin' the fuse! Get back—or it'll blow you all to hell!"

There was no bluff here—no bluff about either of them. And then, as Lou, down below, watched and tried to pray, with stiff lips, for a miracle, where it seemed that nothing less than that could save these angry men from destruction, it came. A man appeared suddenly in the trail above, higher than McNulty, behind him—Clay!

He stood there, clearly revealed in the sharp questing sunlight just then slanting on to that part of the road, and his voice was an imperative roar.

"Get back, boys! Back to safety! It's all right! Get back!"

FOR A MOMENT, they too stared up at him, as if not quite believing their eyes. They had heard the report that he was dead, and here he was. But anger had been subsiding in those breathless seconds, and as no rifle fire swept at them, they had realized that this was no bluff on McNulty's part—that he had really lit the fuse, and that it would blast the overhang down on them, sweep them and the trail beneath their feet to oblivion, before they could hope to reach him.

Only the fear of seeming cowardice in the eyes of each other had kept them from stopping and breaking. Now, at Clay's sharp orders, they turned, headed back down trail for the bend where Lou and Bud waited, running now a lot faster than they had come up it.

Clay watched them, his breath sharp in his lungs. It would be close for that fuse was dangerously short now, but it looked as if they'd be in time, to get back out of range of the destruction about to be let loose.

One other had been astonished at the voice from above. McNulty had whirled, staring in bewilderment and incredulity. For a moment, even as Clay shouted orders to the others below, he watched, not quite believing.

Then anger drove out incredulity. Somehow, this man had come back here to mock him, to try and frustrate him in his moment of triumph. McNulty started to reach for his gun, and stopped the motion, his eyes

going to the shortening length of fuse in new dismay.

Watching Clay, he had forgotten his own peril, forgotten to run. Already Clay was retreating again, getting back out of the way. His face, turkey-red a moment before, suddenly white as the patches of snow which still lay in the shady places here high on the hill, McNulty turned, started to run as well. But he knew that he had delayed too long. Everyone else would get out of the reach of the thing which he had let loose—everyone but himself.

Now the giant powder was letting go, with a sort of awful majesty. The vast overhang above the trail seemed to poise for moment, starting to crumble, to mushroom out above him. McNulty saw it coming descending, even as the earth beneath his feet was rocking, starting to slide.

Then the power was in motion, down-sweeping—taking the trail with it, and scooping up the wildly fleeing McNulty like an ant in the path of a gale.

24

FOR A FEW moments the whole mountain seemed to rock in the impact of the blast, the thousands of tons of earth and rock plunging downward, released at last. Above it, back where he stood Clay felt the shock of it and had to cling for a few moments to a tree to keep from being tumbled loose and shaken down with the rest of the mass, going past him only a few yards away. Then dust came up from the seething mass, a solid cloud which obscured the sun. But not before he had seen that the running men had reached the safety of the bend of the trail, ahead of the slide.

Down there, panting with the nearness of it, Peg Leg looked at his companions, and mumbled something about what fools they had started to be. Others seemed to be saying or thinking the same thing, but in the engulfing roar, no one could hear.

They stood there while the dust swirled so thickly that it made them cough and choke and blotted all sight away. While the mountain ceased to tremble, and the heavy thunder subsided to a troubled silence. A vast rawness began to appear again where the trail had been—and was no longer.

Of them all, only Lou seemed happy. Clay was up there—she had seen him, heard him speak. He was alive. What did any of the rest mat-

But, looking into the faces of her companions, these men for whom, in the aggregate, she had come to feel a curious sort of affection, a community of spirit, she began to understand the tragedy, to see that it did matter. The dust was slowly settling now, so that something could be seen— the place where the trail had been, an empty yawning gap now, and the bigger hole in the skyline where the overhang had poised like a crouching monster.

And, down below, where there had been a great, deep gap which seemed to have no bottom—not a wide canyon, but an impassable one—was a new fill, clear to the top. And across this, as the dust settled, they rubbed their eyes and stared in bewilderment at the tiny figure picking its way toward them—Clay Nyman, footsore but smiling.

He was able to walk without much trouble, straight to them. Lou started to go to him, then stopped as the others swirled to surround him.

"We're sure thankin' you, feller," one bearded miner declared. "For orderin' us back when ye did. Saved our necks. Guess we'd kind of lost our heads."

Others were saying the same thing with hearty enthusiasm. Peg Leg voiced the same thought, officially, but a little wryly.

"Though if ye could a got there just a mite sooner, to shoot that two-laigged polecat 'fore he lit that fuse—"

Clay, unexpectedly, grinned. It cracked the layer of dust across his face rather strangely.

"That's nothing to worry about," he said. "It makes a nice fill. It would take a big crew a year's work to do what it did. And, things being the way they were, it was just about out of the question to throw a bridge

across there." He gestured to the canyon.

THE ALCALDE shook his head dubiously, looking at the fill on which Clay had crossed.

"Guess there ain't no arguin' on them p'ints," he conceded. "And it did one good thing—catchin' that boss of the Circle 7 and savin' us from hangin' or buryin' him. But when that's said, seems like it's about all said."

"You mean you don't like it?" Clay demanded, in apparent surprise.

"On'y time I ever liked the toothache was when it quit," Peg Leg grunted. "Felt darned good then, I'll admit. But I wouldn't never go and git it, just for the fun of havin' it quit. Nope."

Clay grinned again.

"I know how you feel," he conceded. "How you all feel—with the trail gone. But it's not bad, like you think. It's good. With McNulty out of the way, his crew are still up there, but they're like dehorned cattle. They won't raise any more ruckus. And, whether he aimed it that way or not McNulty did us a big favor, blowin' that overhang down."

"I don't never say a man's crazy, till he's proved he ain't," Peg Leg grunted.

"When I came along here, a while back, McNulty's men were in the way, so I couldn't follow the road," Clay went on. "So I did what I'd been thinkin' about before, but never had the time. Look over there at the waterfall. See anything queer?"

"Looks kinda dusty, in the spray of it," Bud volunteered, while the others stared in perplexity.

"So it does, Bud," Clay agreed. "But it isn't all dust that you see. There's a sort of a shadow behind it. A real one. And still not a shadow at all."

"The more ye talk, the more I wonder who is crazy here," Peg Leg

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Western Action published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1947.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Western Action and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 12th day of September, 1947. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) (SEAL)

grumbled.

"It took me a lot of hard scramblin' to get around and through this canyon and over to that," Clay went on. "Sure a lot diff'rent from walkin' right back across the fill. But here's the point—just as I'd begun to suspect. There's a ledge there, which looks solid, with heavy trees all in front of it. And, the place being so hard to get at, and the waterfall there too, nobody ever did explore that one spot. They took it at its face value, what it looked like—as being a solid as all the rest."

"And ye mean it ain't?" Peg Leg demanded, in growing excitment.

"Just that. I got there, and found that, by going back in the thick spray and mist right at the side there, but not in the water at all, that which looks like a shadow is just a thick growth of trees—but with light showin' through them enough to make it look shadowy! I walked through them, all right. And by cutting them out of the way, there's a natural gap there, a break in the wall, an easy road about twenty feet wide. Plenty big enough to drive a wagon through!"

While the others gaped, still not quite understanding, he swept an arm in an encompassing gesture.

"There's a narrow spot or so on the trail down below, of course, but two or three days work with dynamite will make a good road—a good wagon road, right on up to here! And from here on, with this canyon filled across, is a straight road across to the edge of the waterfall and through that gap—into Five Corners! Two or three days from now, coming up here and into camp, with plenty of supplies for everybody. And it'll take a lot of snow to block that road for very long at a time!"

NOW, AS THEY understood, a roar went up from the listening miners—a shout of acclamation and triumph. They had gone through a lot of things in the last several hours, from high revenge to terror and a descent to the depths, as everything seemed lost. But this was a climax to suit the most finicky. By his own act, in doing the thing that he had believed would bring ruin to them, McNulty had brought prosperity.

The fact that it could have been done without his help, after what Clay had discovered, was of no particular importance. It had been done by McNulty. The fact that the act of it had brushed him aside at the same time, was only poetic justice, in their minds.

They yelled, and crowded closer to shake Clay's hand, and to look at the new fill. And then, in sudden triumph, to go changing across and through the gap, between the trees. Clay watched them go, and then he turned to Lou, and, looking at him, she saw how very weary he looked, how gray his face was, beneath the coating of dust.

"Clay!" she said, and was beside him.

Clay looked at her, and tried to smile, and staggered a little. Then she had caught his arm.

"You're hurt!" she said. "McNulty said you were dead—"

"I'm not," Clay said. "Thanks to you." He pulled out the lucky piece, showed it to her.

"He did think he'd killed me. A rifle bullet—right here; but this turned it."

For a long moment, Lou looked at it, then back at him, her eyes brimming.

"Did you see that dent in it, in the same place?" she whispered. "It turned a cannibal spear once, for my great-grandfather. He always swore it was lucky, after that."

"Reckon he was right," Clay agreed. "And I'm sure lucky—that you sent it to me. You—you don't hate me—any more—because I'm not your brother?"

"Hate you?" said Lou. "I—I couldn't ever really do that—Clay."

The others had gone. Clay set his fingers beneath her reluctant chin, tilting it so that he could look into her eyes. And at what he saw there, he gave a great sigh of content.

"Now I'm mighty glad that I'm *not* your brother," he said.

THE END

"Right now," said Buzz, "I got other business to attend to."

Devil - Driving Dude

By Eric Thorstein

Clam Carlin was out to wreck the Shasta drove one way or another — this, Buzz Fleer knew. But how could giving away upwards of a hundred head of cows, all of them healthy, fit into Carlin's aims?

THE GRAND OPERA House of Cuayoke, Texas had been built with a balcony running all around three sides, and the biggest stage that part of the country had seen yet. Jim Bleniki built it, and swore when he did that he'd see opera in it before he died. Jim was a little optimistic. Texas grew, but not that fast, and Jim himself didn't live to a ripe old age.

Jim had a passion for opera, but that didn't mean he wasn't a good business man. He built the house so it could accomodate a barnstorming company and plenty of first-nighters, but being the practical fellow he was he built it for everyday use, too. The bar was as big and as shiny as any of the others Cuayoke citizens could choose from.

On top of that, Jim was fussy about his whiskey and his women both. Bleniki was a man of refinement, nobody ever disputed that. The result was that the Grand Opera House was the best bar in Cuayoke.

This particular night, it was, if possible, a little more than the best. The month of June was always kind to Cuayoke commerce. It brought the young men in to see the women, and

it brought the ranch owners in from the country around to hire trail riders from among the young men. There was plenty of both kinds of activity in the Opera House, and most of it was high-spirited. The stakes rose at the gambling tables, till, near the small hours of morning, whole herds were changing hands. From the tables and the bar, shrieks of feminine laughter rose higher and more frequent. And on the big stage, the singing was gayer, and the dancing less inhibited, the later it got.

Over in one corner, just out of the brilliance of the circle of light cast by Bleniki's famous crystal chandelier, two men were sitting at a small table, wrapped up in the kind of privacy you can get best in an overcrowded place. Both of them were tall, lean-drawn, and weatherbeaten. One wore the rancher's uniform...an eastern suit three years behind the styles. Th other was easy to mark as a cowhand. His long legs were encased in leather chaps; his shirt was fancy as they come; his spurs were silver, his boots stitched in three colors; around his neck he wore the universal bandanna.

He was dressed for town and fun, but neither of the two men was joining in the general noise and excitement. The two of them sat soberly, with ther drinks almost forgotten on the table in front of them. The rancher was doing most of the talking, his voice low and intent.

"WHAT DO you say, Buzz?" he wound up, with a questioning look at the cowboy. "It's no job I'd give a man without warning. I ought to be doing it myself...but I tell you honestly I don't know if I'll have a ranch when I get back, if I go."

"You hired yourself a trailboss," Buzz told him, grinning. "I got my own scores to settle with Carlin."

"You don't have to decide right now, Buzz. I'd kind of like it better if you slept on it before you made it final. I can't say anything at all is goin' to happen on that trip...but I can't say for sure there's anything that *won't* happen, either. Do you think you can get men who'll stick with you?"

"It'd be a sorry country if I couldn't." The cowhand picked up the drink that had been wasting its time on the table, and gulped it down. "There ain't much y' can say fer this gawdforsaken grassland, except it ain't within the nature of the country a man's friends shouldn't stick. Men get mighty friendly when they find they're scattered thin in between the herds of cattle an' the thunderin' big sky up there. I ain't worried about findin' some o' my old pardners t' make the trip with me, an' I ain't worried about makin' the trip myself." He pushed his glass away and stood up. "Shake on it now, 'f'you want. We can settle up all the little matters later on."

The rancher's brown face lit up as he grasped the other's hand. "By Gawd, Buzz, I think you can do it!" He was silent a moment, then added. "An' maybe I'm lettin' my imagination run away with me...but don't *overdo* it, Buzz. My cattle ain't worth losin' your life over."

Buzz grinned again, his lips taut over his uneven white teeth. "I reckon my life as a right valuable piece o' property, Mr. Shasta, an' I aim t' treat it as such. It don't go cheap... not for Carlin nor for none of his hired help, anyways."

"The name's Greg, to you," Shasta said, matching Buzz's smile. "An' when you start figurin' on the price of property...remember, it's worth something to me too."

"*And* to me," said a soft feminine voice, a voice with the kind of promising overtones that made Buzz stand up and take notice clear across the biggest dance hall in the west. Only this time the voice was so close it was practically under his collar. Something superior in the way of redheads had been standing there for the last few minutes, about as close to Buzz as she could get and still leave room for him to have the pleasure of pulling her a little closer.

He didn't waste time.

"I'll be out to the ranch t' see you soon as I round up some han's, Greg," he promised. "Right now, I got some

other business to tend to...on my lap."

BUZZ HAD no trouble finding trailhands. There was hardly a cowhand in Cuayoke who wouldn't jump at the chance to travel under Buzz Fleer. He was a dude in town, all right, a dancing fool, and a little more than 100 percent ladies' man, but out on the trail, them fancy girls from Bleniki's wouldn't have known him for the same man.

By the end of a week, Buzz had seven hands, a cook, and his supplies. He rode out to the Six-bar-one to report to Shasta.

Shasta's ranch-house was a surprise to Buzz. He'd met the rancher in Cuayoke several times, and liked him. He knew, too, that the Six-bar-one was operating on a margin a little slimmer than it was possible to run a ranch on. But he'd heard of the fine cattle the ranch owned, and he'd been impressed by the owner's appearance. It was a shock to see the dugout that served as living quarters and headquarters on Shasta's outfit.

He began to understand why the rancher was so desperate about getting this drove to market. He must have had a hard time deciding whether it was more important for him to stay on home territory and keep a personal eye on old Clam Carlin, or to drive his steers uptrail himself. Either way, he was going to do some fancy worrying about the place where he wasn't. An outfit like this couldn't afford to take any kind of loss...and with Carlin, the biggest operator in a hundred miles, out to cut Greg Shasta's throat any way he could, it was going to be a careful rider who didn't get tripped up somewhere.

Buzz tied up his horse at the rail in front of the dugout, pulled open the door and called inside. Shasta was out almost as soon as he called. The rancher was in his shirtsleeves and comfortable soft shoes, his hair tousled, and all the stiffness of his town appearance wiped away. He looked as if he'd been working hard, and Buzz thought you'd never know he owned the ranch unless somebody told you. He looked more like a cowhand himself than like a rancher.

"Sorry I wasn't looking for you, Buzz. Might have had a welcome mat made, or something." He surveyed the stretched skin doorway and the log front of the dugout ruefully. "You see, we ain't got much to show off out here...except some of the finest cattle in Texas. All my money's gone into stock so far."

"That there ranchhouse maybe looks purty sad t' you, Greg," Buzz walked over and taped the well chinked logs. "But it looks to me like a mighty warm place to hole up come winter, after some o' the spots I spent some merry old Christmases in."

"I won't say much for it in wintertime," Greg smiled. "But it works fine the other way around. Let's get in out of this sun, an' get things straight."

INSIDE, THE dugout was dim and gratefully cool after the blazing Texas day outside. Buzz dropped into a homemade chair and gave his report, while Shasta nodded with satisfaction on each point.

"I couldn't have done as well myself," the rancher said, finally. "Never could have got Pete Martin to tend chuck wagon without you along. That boy sticks to you like a fly does to molasses."

"Pete an' me understand each other," Buzz commented briefly. "Too many folks in this country seem likely to incline to believin' you can judge a man by th' color of 'is skin. Me, if I didn't gnow before I come here, I shore learned, workin' with Pete."

"You've got a good bunch of men, Buzz." Shasta looked over the list he'd made while the trailboss talked. "You got a handshake on all of 'em?"

"All except Boney Carnahan. I gotta check with him when I git back in town.'

"All right, then, I'l leave it up t' you to replace him if you have to. No need to make a special trip to let me know. Now," he pulled out a large map, folded and torn and much-used. "You know the route to Abilene. That's where Carlin's droves are

goin'...an' that's where I want it to look like mine is."

"Where at *are* you goin'?"

"Dodge City." Greg marked a wide circle in pencil on the map, as Buzz looked over his shoulder. "Buyers are coming there for the drove. You won't have any trouble once you get there. That is, you won't have any if you see to it nobody knows where you're goin'. If I know Carlin, he'll trust to his one pocketbook in Abilene, keepin' the buyers away from my drove. Could even be he won't try anythin' on the trail at all."

"But we won't be in Abilene," Buzz nodded. "Anybody know besides you an' me?"

"Nobody."

"Let's keep it that-a-way," the trail-hand said. "No need fer th' boys t' know. Any of 'em got girls in Abilene, they can go on aroun' after we get done our business in Dodge. Jus' Pete'll hafta know. He gotta have enough supplies fer the trip."

"That's all up t' you, Buzz. When I hire a good man, I know better than to try to tell him how to do his job."

"When 'r' you fixin' on doin' th' road-brandin'?" Buzz asked. "I'd kinda like t' be around."

"Week from today. You start any time you want to after that."

"I'll bring m' boys out t' help, then, an' we can start right out come dawn next day."

Greg folded up the map, slowly and thoughtfully. "I still feel kind of bad, paying another man to take my trouble. If you don't make it. Buzz.. if anything happens, just remember, I know you can do as much as I can. If Carlin can figure out a way to stop you, he could have stopped me too."

"Carlin can't stop me now," Buzz grinned. "Not if it's Dodge City we're headin' fer."

"What's in Dodge City?" Greg asked, the corners of his mouth quirking.

"It ain't what, it's who. An' I ain't tellin' anybody else how to find 'er. That's special an' private fer me, an' ten Clam Carlin's couldn't keep me away from Dodge."

Buzz started for the door, and turned just before he left to add. "An' furthermore, if it'll set your mind to ease..I ain't got no wish t' arrive in Dodge emptyhanded. This is one baby for which money in the hand an' more of the same in all pockets is a very essential item. I'll get y'r cattle in there if I hafta nurse every head of 'em every inch of the way."

THE DAY SET for th road-branding dawned hot and dry. Greg Shasta stood at the open doorway of his dugout ranch-house, and watched the road anxiously till the little party of riders came in sight. They were later than he'd expected, but he realized why when he saw them. Buzz had the *remuda* and the chuckwagon in tow, apparently figuring on a start the next morning, straight from the ranch.

Greg stepped out to meet him with a smile of relief.

"Good thing you came totin' your travelin' kit," he said, pointing to the cook wagon and the string of horses. "Carlin's got wind of the branding being set for today, and he's got his own outfit ready to go in town tonight. Guess he planned to send them uptrail right on your heels."

"Lookin' out fer any chance to devil me on th' way? That'd be the outfit Bud Kennedy's bossin' for 'im?"

Greg nodded.

"That's how come I brung Pete an' the *remuda* along," Buzz finished up. "Kennedy was in town hiring extra han's. He took Boney Carnahan away from me, an' I had to hunt up a man at th' last minute. Ain't too happy about what I got neither." He lowered his voice, although they were well out of earshot of the cowboys. "I couldn't hones'ly say why, but George was jus' a lettle bit too anxious t' come along. It ain't right to suspect a man you got nothing against, an' I got nothing against George, oney I am sure a-goin' t' keep both of my eyes upon him."

Greg nodded, taking it all in, and leaving the talking up to Buzz.

"Anyhow," he wound up, "tha's why I toted th' whole outfit along with me. Kennedy'll find out, an' start from town tomorrow, hopin' to catch

us along trail. We'll lay over here an extra day, an' see can we give 'im a mite of a start on us. Make it a bit deeficult for him, even if we can't put 'im off altogether."

"Good boy, Buzz," Greg approved. He untied his own horse from the railing, and mounted. "Let's get out to the field. My own boys got the drove rounded up, an' they can get the branding done today, and then sit us down tonight an' decide on what's best to do."

It was a long day's work, burning Buzz Fleer's road-brand into the top hair of Shasta's drove. That mark, the wavy line with the arrow struck through it, was known up and down the trail. When they got out of home terrritory, Shasta's mark on their hides wouldn't mean a thing but Buzz's brand on the hair would be identity enough for any cowman en route.

By sundown, the long job was done. Shasta's hands made room for Fleer's eight men to spread their bedding, and the rancher and trailboss, too tired themselves to talk, fell into bed, and left decisions for the morning.

BUZZ WOKE early, even earlier than usual. He was standing at the window, surveying a hunk of weather that might have been sent out on order for a trial start, and wondering what to do about it, and what Kennedy was doing, in Cuayoke, when Shasta opened one eye and grunted at him questioningly.

"Think mebbe," Buzz told him reflectively, "We'd do good to get ourselves an early start this mornin' after all."

"How come?" The rancher was already wide awake, pulling on his clothes as he talked.

"I got to thinkin'...If we let this here Kennedy go up ahead of us, he don't have to do nothin' but stall. Travel slow, an' make us stay behind. Carlin' can afford t' take a loss on one drove. You can't afford nothin' of th' sort. If he's up ahead, we got to travel slow. We get up ahead, an' at least I'll feel like a free men, c'n travel as fast as I want."

"Maybe you got something there," Greg agreed. "It'll be easier to stay ahead than to stay behind. All right, let's get 'em moving. Nothin' more *I* have to tell you, is there?"

"Not onless you got somethin' on y'r mind. I told you I ain't worryin'."

Neither of them wasted any more time in words or extra actions. An hour after dawn, the drove was out on the trail. Buzz himself rode out ahead to have a look see at the territory before the trailhands and cattle had to cover it, but before he went he made some arrangements that would have caused a revolution in the ranks if any less trusted boss had tried them.

George Sandley, the replacement hand hired at the last minute should by rights have ridden in the drag, at the end of the long line of march. Buzz put one of his best men back there in the cloud of dust, and let George ride flank up ahead. He noticed George didn't seem properly appreciative, and it worried him, but he decided against mentioning it to the rancher. Shasta had enough on his mind, trying to keep his small herd of fine longhorns out of Clam Carlin's hands without being bothered by details he was paying Buzz to take care of.

The important thing was to have trustworthy men at the back. Pete Martin, of course, would bring up the extreme rear with the chuck wagon and *remuda*, but Pete wouldn't stay there. He had to circle the caravan and get up to the noon rest location before the rest of them arrived. So no matter how peculiar it looked to give his greenest hand one of the best positions, Buzz sent George along the side, and trusted to the men's faith in him to keep them from complaining.

He gave the hands and the cattle one last check, left the horses and wagon consigned to Pete's expert care, then dug his spurs into his own

horse, as the front of the drove started to move, and galloped off to see how things looked up ahead.

The cattle had given nosigns of being troublesome critters during the branding, but Buzz always worked on the principle of wearing them out the first few days, and getting them off home ground as fast as possible. They were always easier to handle in unfamiliar territory. This time there was the additional incentive of Carlin's man, Kennedy on his heels. There was no telling what time of day Kennedy would start out; even if he left at dawn as they had, starting from the ranch instead of Cuayoke it gave Buzz a head start. He meant to keep it if he could.

If they could do that much on each of the first two days. Buzz would feel fairly secure.

It meant some hot and heavy riding for him. He had to cover almost twice the territory that the other hands did. At daybreak, he was up away, ahead of the cattle-train, inspecting the terrain, and then riding back to let the cowhands know what he'd found. After noon rest, he followed the same routine, and at night, while the men took turns riding herd, he lay only half-asleep, one ear open for the first sign of trouble. They didn't look like stampeding cattle...but Buzz knew they didn't have to look like it to do it.

BY THE END of the second day out, Buzz was tired as if he'd been out a week on an ordinary trip. But he'd made his time, and he figured he could relax a little from then on. There was just one thing that had to be done first.

He waited till the camp was bedded down for the night, and the cowhand who was riding herd was out at the other side of the sleeping herd. Then he edged his way quietly to where Pete Martin was snoring under the chuck wagon, nudged the cook awake, and whispered a few words in his ear. Pete nodded comprehension, and was immediately fast asleep again. Buzz led his horse out of the rope corral attached to the wagon, and walked the animal into the woods on the side of the hill that flanked the trail through this stretch.

He mouned as quietly as he could, and kept the animal in the woods until they were safely away from camp. Then he came down on to the trail again, after dismounting and taking a preliminary look on foot.

He had a long ride back before he caught a glimpse of Kennedy's camp, bedded down, like his, for the night. He didn't get too close, just near enough to make out the shapes of the chuck wagon and the sleeping drove. He had to assume it was Carlin's cattle, but there wasn't much room for doubt. Carlin had his own way of geting news, and Kennedy would have left hot on Fleer's heels, as soon as word came through of the departure from the ranch.

Buzz rode back, frowning. Kennedy must have been driving those cows like a madman to get even a slight edge on the long lead Buzz had had on him to start with. He was still frowning when he got back to camp as the first rays of the sun crept over the horizon, and he lay down for the fore full dawn, still trying to come to a decision. He could run his cattle ragged keeping ahead of Kennedy, or he could let the man come up behind him, and find out what would happen.

When he woke again, with the morning sun slanting into his eyes, his mind was made up. He couldn't run the cattle as he had the last few days. . .but neither could Kennedy. He'd hit for slight decrease today, another the day after, and then relax till cattle and hands were rested, and speed it up again afterwards. It was the only way out he could see. If it didn't work he'd just have to face it out with Carlin's hands.

For a week it worked. Buzz didn't try another night trip. Conserving his own strength was as important as anything else. But he found some excuse, each day, to get behind the drove and see if anything was in

sight. On a clear day, if he got behind the dust, he could see the other outfit, but he judged them to be still as far behind. Maybe they'd stay there. It could be Kennedy's orders were only to keep him in sight.

ON THE TENTH day out, Buzz began to relax. He'd been traveling steady and regular, the cattle were in fine condition and behaving well. The hands were working together, with no sign of trouble from George Sandley's direction, and, as near as he could tell from the reports Pete brought up with the chuck wagon from behind, Kennedy's drove was as far behind as it had been all week.

He left early after the noon rest for his ride ahead, and went a little farther than usual. They were traveling now around a wide curve, the rim of a rise of foothills. It provided shelter for the cattle, and an easily defined traveling route, but it meant more reconnoitering. You didn't know what was ahead until you got there.

Some miles up, he found a good spot for night camp, then rode on a little, and picked another site farther along for the next day's nooning. It was late in the afternoon, and only a short distance from the night location he'd picked, when he met Pete with the wagon to give him instructions about making camp.

Pete didn't give him a chance to talk.

"They movin' up on us," he yelled at Buzz as soon as the trailboss came in sight. "They done pick' up speed, I reckon, an' I c'd see they dust by th' time I broke camp; an' I reckon they's a lot closer now."

Buzz didn't stop to talk. It was late in the day to start pushing the cattle, but he'd have to try. He gave Pete orders to go to the first spot he'd picked, and wait there without unloading anything, till someone came along with more orders. If he was told to go ahead, the cook was to take the chuckwagon up to the other spot, farther on, and make camp there.

Buzz burned up the mile and a half between himself and the Shasta drove. He exchanged a few words with the lead trailhands, and they decided the cattle were rested enough to take the extra push. Then he went on to the drag, pulled one of his men out of the dust cloud, and took his place at the back himself. He sent the hand on up ahead to tell Pete to move camp to the site up ahead,

He stayed behind himself long enough to make sure the drove was moving at the raised tempo, then dropped back gradually till he was clear of the dust. He cut into the hills and rode back as fast as he could, keeping an eye out for dust on the trail.

He sighted it in a half hour's ride. That meant the Carlin herd wasn't more than a few miles behind. Kennedy had taken advantage of a few days' rest, and the way the trail curved through here, to push his drove to make up the distance in a day's run.

BUZZ WHEELED his horse, and got back to his own drove as fast as he could. Kennedy would have to camp at the first site he'd picked, he knew that. There wasn't any water in between. That gave them five miles still, as short a distance as was reasonable between two droves, but enough to start with the next day, with Kennedy's cattle as worn out as they were bound to be.

He wondered whether to tell the men there might be trouble, and finally decided against it. No sense in having everybody trigger-nervous. But with the other camp so near, it was reasonable to keep an extra man on duty riding herd around the sleeping cattle. It was a small drove, and he'd only kept one man on at a time, but tonight he set up teams of two, explaining that there was another camp set up a scant five miles behind them, and if there should be any trouble in the other camp, they'd need to control their own cattle in a hurry.

There wasn't any trouble. The night went quietly, and so did the next day and the next night. Kennedy managed somehow to keep that tail on them. No matter how fast Buzz drove his own cattle, Kennedy

kept pace. The two trailbosses met, sometimes, riding on inspection trips, and nodded to each other with stiff civility. They had nothing against each other except the men they worked for.

For four days and nights, Kennedy stayed just far enough behind to keep Buzz's dust out of his nose. Two weeks out of Cuayoke they were in the broad stretch of prairie-land that lay between cow-Texas and the trains in Kansas. The foothills were gone, and the two droves travelled in clear sight of each other.

They bedded down at night as close as Kennedy could find water. Buzz had stopped trying to race his cattle. Kennedy could keep up, and apparently didn't want to pass him, so it made no difference how fast he went. He concentrated on finding campsites separated as far as possible from the next one back, but that wasn't easy. They were seldom more than five miles apart.

Buzz tried to sleep with one eye open and one ear alert, but tiredness catches up with a man after a while. The night it happened, he was fast asleep, and came awake with the cowman's knowledge of what had happening. Nobody told him; nobody had to waken him. He heard the first rumblings, and was awake immediately, cursing himself for having slept at all, shouting orders, and mounting his own horse.

From the camp behind, twenty thousand head of cattle were thundering full tilt across the prairie almost as if they had been aimed in Buzz's direction. The Shasta drove had come awake at the first sound. They were edgy now, nervous, on their feet, and a few already had tried to make a break. Buzz and the seven trailhands, Pete Martin and the two *remuda* tenders were all at work, dashing around and around the drove in their saddles, keeping them hemmed in, pressed into a narrowing circle, turning back the few that broke off to join the Carlin stampede.

But within minutes, Buzz knew it wouldn't work. The stampede was coming at them head-on, and if they tried to hold their own cows in much longer, it was going to mean mangled men and horses. Their was nothing to do now but let them go, and try to keep them from going too far off the trail.

He shouted over the noise of the pounding hooves, and the shout went down the line, and around the circle of the hands. They sidestepped their horses, and then Shasta's twelve thousand head were pounding in the van of Carlin's twenty thousand.

The cowhands from two ranches rode herd for an hour on the mingled drove, pushing their weary horses to the limit of endurance, and then a little further. Almost imperceptibly, the mad running slowed a little, and then a little more. By the time the light began to break, some twenty-odd men, cooks, trailbosses, hands, and horse tenders, were riding in a wide circle around a band of more than thirty thousand cows.

THEY MADE no attempt to separate them that night, but let the animals and men both get a few hours rest. The weeding out took a full day, after the late rising. Two of Buzz's men and two of Kennedy's lined up in a tunnel formation, just wide enough for three or four cattle to pass through at a time. The others drove the cattle through on one end, and separated them by brands at the other, while the four men in the middle counted.

When he got the count from his own men, Buzz rode over to where Kennedy, on horseback, was directing the Carlin hands.

"My men give me a hundred over," Buzz shouted. "What's your count?"

The Carlin foreman consulted with one of his hands a minute. "We're just right," he called back. "Your men musta added a hundred someplace."

It puzzled Buzz, but he let it ride. The only possible answer was that his men had miscounted and added a hundred someplace, as Kennedy suggested. Whatever Carlin was up to, it wasn't making Shasta a present of a hundred head of longhorn steers. There was a teasing thought, too, in

his mind, about this stampede. But it just plain didn't make sense for Kennedy to do something that would cause him as much trouble as it would Buzz. . .and not do any harm of any kind to either one of the owners.

This was no time for puzzles, however. Buzz had something more immediate on his mind. He reined in next to Kennedy, and motioned with his head to the comparative quiet of his own chuck wagon, where they could talk without shouting. The other trailboss nodded, and the two men rode over together.

"Seems like you 'n' y'r boys 're in a mighty big hurry," Buzz started.

"We'd kinda like t'see the inside of Abilene agin'," Kennedy answered noncommitally.

"An' it likewise seems like you got some troublesome critters," Buzz went on, ignoring the other man.

"That might be, all dependin' upon how you look at it."

"An' that bein' the case, an' since we ain't in no hurry to get to Abilene a-tall," Buzz wound up, "I'm a-goin' to do a right neighborly thing by you, Mister Kennedy, an' allow you to progress fer a day whilst we stand here an' wait till yer far enough ahead."

Kennedy couldn't refuse. His animals had started the stampede. It was reasonable for Buzz not to be want to be right in front of them any more. He nodded brusquely, muttered a brief thanks, and let it go at that.

BUZZ WATCHED him ride away with a feeling of relief. That nagging feeling of something not quite right in the whole picture was still in his mind, but he still couldn't see any way to get any closer to what was bothering him, so he forgot about it, gave his orders to his hands, and rode over to hold converse with Pete Martin.

The cook was setting things straight in the disordered chuck wagon, grumbling under his breath in gentle fury. He greeted Buzz with a volley of complaints.

"Cain't see why I had t'come all th' way out heah to the wil' an' wooly west. Y'oud a-thought I'd a had better sense. Seem like I jes nachally go 'roun' askin' faw trouble any ole time I git a chance. Now you take this heah wagon. . .I. . ."

"You're one damn fine man to have on a drive, Pete, and the reason you come out west, it was because you had a feelin' deep down th'inside o' your bones I needed you, that's why," Buzz interrupted. "Lissen, Pete, we got enough stores fer a couple extra days on trail?"

"Why you askin'?" Martin demanded suspiciously.

"On account of I sent Kennedy an' his whole cluckin' outfit on ahead of us, an' they might like to kinda slow us down. Can't tell yet."

"Well you better pull in youah belt then, man, on account of we is about to go upon foresho'tened rations. Some o' the stuff got banged up bad when th' wagon got hisself bumped by them dumb cows."

Buzz let it sink in slowly. "I dunno," he said finally. "If we can work it t' get him far enough ahead of us, we c'd cut straight across fer Dodge, instead o' swingin' clear around Abilene. Could be this here stampede was a good thing altogether. Mebbe I was right th' first time, when I wanted t' leave after him, an' play it slow. I dunno, Pete, it's all mighty funny, an' there's somethin' I can't quite get a-holt of in my mind, but I got a hunch, it's a-goin' t' work out all right from now on."

"I shore hope you' right, Buzz, oney I aint so convinced upon it like you seem t' be. You want me t' staht in t' day with sho't rations?"

"No." Buzz tightened the reins, and gave his horse warning to be ready to move. "Nope. Give 'em full rations today. We'll hold on ontil we see what Brother Kennedy is fixin' t' do. Aint no use worryin' th' hands right now." He gave the final tug on the reins, and dug in his spurs, to go off and help with the job of quieting the cattle.

They spent the next day quietly grazing the drove, and in midafternoon, Buzz rode on ahead to see what Kennedy was up to. He came back

with a big smile on his face, and relief in all the tired lines of his body.

"Kennedy's took 'is bumptious critters ahead," he shouted as soon as he was in hailing distance. "Wanted t' wear 'em out, I reckon. We'll get us an early start come mornin'." He kept the rest of the news for the campfire at evening chow.

"We're a-headin' fer Dodge from here on, boys."

There were murmurs all around of protest and pleasure, depending on who had a girl where. Then there were questions. The men weren't too happy, finding out they'd been headed all along for Dodge City, when Buzz had hired them to go to Abilene, but after a half-hour's talk and explanations, there wasn't a murmur left in the crowd. Nobody in Cuayoke was over-fond of Clam Carlin. Men worked for him if they had to, and by the code of the cowhand, if they took his money, they did his work as well as they could—but if they could find someone else to work for first, they did.

Now when Buzz explained how Carlin had been trying to break Greg Shasta, and why the fact that Dodge City was their destination had been kept secret, any objections the men had at first were stopped at the source.

"Hey, Buzz," one of the hands put in. "You don't ee-magine Buddy Kennedy started that air stampede on purpose?"

"What good'd it do 'im?" Buzz demanded.

"Don't y' think it'd pay Ole Clam t' wreck a drove of his wild longhorns if he c'd do damage t' Shasta's bred cows at th' same time?"

Buzz shook his head slowly. "I can't see it. I just can't see it. It don't make sense. An' anyhow," he finished, "if that's what he was plannin', his plans sure went all wrong. Th' way it worked out, we got Kennedy off our trail, an' a clear road to Dodge, without nobody bein' any wiser."

He strode away from the fire to get his sleeping roll, feeling pretty good about everything. Only one little thing was bothering him now—and that was George Sandley. George had a funny kind of smile on his face that Buzz couldn't quite place. There was something wrong with that smile. "Oh well," Buzz thought as he fell asleep, "George's got a girl in Dodge, too."

HE WAS STILL thinking that when he woke up in the starlight. He came wide awake, and still the thought stuck in his mind. From his left, where the herd of cattle slept, a low voice sang softly one of the cowboy's lullabies. The night-rider, circling the drove, let his voice float out to them over the prairie. Buzz remembered, lying there in the starlight, how surpised he'd been the first time he found out that singing really kept them quiet. He'd thought someone was playing a joke on him, one of the famous cowboy jokes. So he didn't sing when his own turn came, and he found out—

Suddenly he realized what had made him wake up. The singing was starting and stopping, starting and stopping again. It wasn't steady and even, soothing and reassuring to the animals. It was jerky and disturbing.

Buzz was on his feet, checking the faces of the men asleep beside him. All there but George—George Sandley. Buzz leapt to his own nighthorse, saddled and bridled like all the others, waiting there for emergencies, right at hand, and rode out quietly, circling the herd, going round in the opposite direction from where George was riding.

Sandley hadn't seen him yet, he knew that. The stars were brilliant, but there was no moon, and a man wasn't likely to see anything he wasn't looking for. Again, the singing stopped abruptly, and this time, there was a flare of light, as Sandley struck a match, and a whinnying cry from the man's horse, as if sharp spurs had bit unexpectedly into his sides.

Buzz didn't waste time thinking. His men acted as automatically as he did. One shout brought them all into the saddle, and then eight men were sweeping in a swift and narrowing circle around the drove.

The cows were being driven back before they could find a breaking

point. Beneath the hubbub of hooves and voices, his own as well as the others, Buzz was fitting the pieces together. It was not much past midnight. Sandley had chosen his time well. This was the hour when the animals were likely to be restless, rising to change sides, half awake ready for trouble. This was when the steady reassurance of the man on horseback round about them meant most—the man, his steady horse, and his steady boice. Sandley had let his voice go jerky, had made his horse nervous, and had lit a sudden bright light.

Even then, Buzz thought, watching the cattle, with this drove there shouldn't have been trouble. Not after a day's rest, not with tame cows, bred animals like these. Carlin's longhorns, shipped to market straight from a free-range roundup—you could expect it of those animals, but the way these had jumped for a stampede on such small irritations—

It just didn't make sense.

Buzz found the trouble center. He yelled to three of the men to cut out the cows in the northwest section. There were maybe a hundred head here, milling and stamping, searching for a corner to break through. The three hands rounded them up, took the wild one off to one side, and the rest of the drove, still nervous, but not really anxious to do any travelling, settled back in a short time.

The trailboss left his other three hands riding night herd on the big drove checked quickly on the men who were handling the hundred wild ones, and made sure they were in control.

Then he went looking for Sandley. He hadn't expected to find the man too close by, but he hadn't expected, either, not to be able to find him. He rode by the chuck wagon, where Pete was mounted, ready to defend the last of his precious supplies from man or beast.

He was going to shout a question, but he didn't need to.

"That way," Pete pointed. "Yonder, that man go ridin' straight to his boss!"

BUZZ WAS OFF again without a word, but with something warm inside him at the way two men who work together can understand each other. He and Pete had been driving herd along this trail for a long time now.

He passed the small herd, and picked at the sleeve of one of the men, without stopping.

"Barney, c'mere," he yelled. The trailhand came up alongside, and listened while Buzz threw a few words at him, both of them riding at

breakneck speed. Finally, he nodded, wheeled around, and dashed back to the other two men and their herd of delinquents.

Buzz kept going. Nothing on earth could have stopped him. It didn't make sense for him to be able to to catch Sandley, after the start the other man must have had, but if anger could do it, Buzz would catch up with him.

Dawn was breaking over the hills in the distance when he did it. Buzz used every bit of his advantage. He had his gun out as soon as he was in range, and aimed his shots carefully. He wanted the horse, not the man. Sandley either had to break his speed by turning to fire, or keep going and risk Buzz's bullets. He chose to break speed. No man wants to risk being shot in the back. Buzz got a bullet through the other horse's leg the first time Sandley turned to fire.

"Reach fer th' sky, an' make like yer hangin' onto it," the trailboss shouted as Sandley scrambled to his feet. "Touch that gun, an' yer a dead man."

Sandley reached. He kept on reaching while Buzz swung off his own horse, and relieved the trailhand of his shooting irons. He didn't stop reaching until Buzz had both wrists securely lashed together, and decided it was safe enough to let the man drop his arms in front of him. After he was done reaching, he started talking.

By the time the three hands who'd been assigned to the troublesome herd arrived, with their hundred head of longhorns, Buzz and George Sandley understood each other pretty well, though it would be wrong to say that their understanding had increased their friendship any.

It was full daylight by then, light enough for the job Buzz wanted done.

"Barney, I want you an' th' boys to take a look at them brands," he started. "Not th' road brands. Shasta's brand. The Six-bar-one. Find it?"

The men fell to. They tried ten or twelve cows, and came up looking puzzled.

"It ain't there," they announced. "Any brand a-tall?"

"Nope."

"Cattle right off the wild range, mebbe?" Then he explained. "Seems kinda like Mister Kennedy's stampede the other night was arranged especially fer our benefit, fer to give us a gift, as y' might say, of these here critters. Fresh off the range, a mite nervous, mebbe, an' inclined t' trouble, but after all, ole Clam Carlin had took th' trouble t' put my roadbrand on 'em, jus' so we c'd pick 'em up after the two droves got mixed up a little. It was amighty nice thought on his part, makin' us a present like that, now don't you think so?"

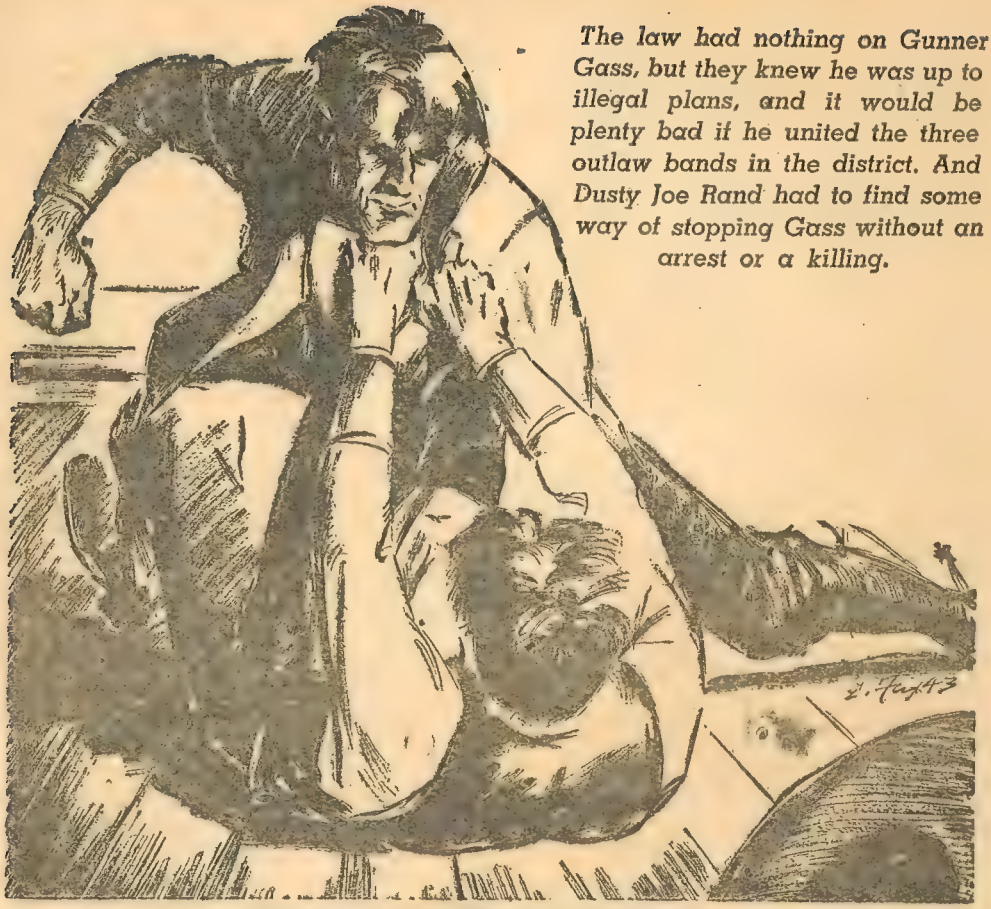
"What you plannin' on doin', Buzz?" Barney asked mildly, "Seem like by rights we ought t' return what aint our'n."

"Jus' exactly what I was thinkin', Barney." Buzz untied Sandley, who was thoroughly frightened and not likely to show much fight any more. "Now if one o' you gents would care t' double up with me on th' way home, an' lend Mr. Sandley here a horse—seein' as how I seem t' have deprived him of 'is own—I think we c'n send back everything that b'longs t' Mister Kennedy an' Mister Carlin."

They mounted Sandley on a horse, and led him around behind the small herd. Then all four of the others backed off out of the way, after pointing the leader cows in the right direction, and had the loudest gun-shootin' jamboree they'd ever had near any kind of animals before. They were still shooting when the nervous cows were halfway out of sight, streaking cross-prairie, with Sandley on horseback behind them, straight for where Kennedy's camp should be.

Buzz watched them out of sight. Then he turned and grinned. "C'mon, boys," he yelled, wheeling his horse, "we got a lot of hurrying t' do. I got a gal in Dodge City, an' I think she's a-goin' t' like th' shape o' my pockets when we get there."

THE END



The law had nothing on Gunner Gass, but they knew he was up to illegal plans, and it would be plenty bad if he united the three outlaw bands in the district. And Dusty Joe Rand had to find some way of stopping Gass without an arrest or a killing.

Now Dusty Joe had the outlaw boss down . . .

LAWMAN'S PRIDE

By T. W. Ford

HE CAME down the trail out of Old Injun Pass into Red Hat, forking the well-known blaze-faced stallion, leading a pack horse. He was a lean man despite a big-boned frame with a bleak look about his high-cheek-boned face. "Be careful!" was stamped all over him. After all, he was Dusty Joe Rand, a special State officer attached to the governor's office, the lawman who despised disguise, who always rode in boldly for his man. The narrow-fitting gray shotgun pants with the black coat and the red neckerchief were well-known in every owlhoot camp up and down the state. Below the border, too.

That neckerchief was jerked up over his mouth and nostrils now against the sand-laden wind from the flats to the south. He was powdered with the dust of a long trail, a little haggard beneath the dark beard stubble from hours in the kak. But his restless gray eyes with that terrible calmness deep in them darted about the town, gave no hint of fatigue. He rode down past the clump of withered cottonwoods and past the livery barn into the plaza at the heart of the town, a casual hand on one of those walnut-

stocked Colts. But he was pretty certain Gunner Gass wouldn't try to blast him down in any dry-gulching setup.

He himself was too big to be cut down that way, too big as a John Law; it would be like teasing a hornets nest. Put a bullet in his back and every badge packer in three states would be killing horseflesh and infesting the trails on the track of the man responsible for the job. No, Gass wouldn't dare try to ambush. Dusty Joe dropped from the hull, tossed the reins of the stallion over the hitchrail at one side of the square. But he was surprised by Gass' boldness, his tacit defiance.

After all, the ex-outlaw, fresh from State prison, had plenty of friends along the trail. And Dusty Joe, in his traditional way, had made no secret of his coming; Gass must have guessed he was coming to see him. It was a little incredible that he had not tried to divert him. That, too, he still remained here in Red Hat. And from his latest tips, Dusty Joe knew Gass was here, here in the *Lost Pinto Bar* across the dust-blurred plaza.

"He's asking for it, the big fool," Dusty Joe said half aloud. Then wasting no time, body bent against the force of the wind, he walked quickly across the square, pulled at the storm door of the barroom. It was only late in the afternoon, but the dust storm of the Rio border town, driving all human life behind walls and then scratching at those walls with myriads of abrasive fingers, had lowered a pall of artificial twilight over the place. A single huddled figure stirred down at the lower end of the street. Faint streamers of light leaked through the cracks of the shutter here and there. oOtherwise it might have been a ghost town.

The storm door gave. He slipped the neckerchief down off his face, spat out sand, hooked one tied-down gun looser, and stepped in. It was a big place, a combination dancehall and barroom. The bar counter with its cracked-up mirror flanked one side. In the rear, a balcony overhung the dance floor. The glow of two coal-oil lamps cut the murk that would have befitted a cemetery. And the place, at that hour and thanks to the storm, was about as lively as one.

A COUPLE of men sat at a table, one of them playing solitaire desultorily. Two others stood talking over beers at the front end of the bar. The fat barkeep himself dozed on a stool behind the counter, and Dusty Joe's quick eyes picked out the house guard seated on the stairs leading to the balcony. At least, he *had* been seated. For the special State officer had hardly taken a stride into the cone of light from the nearer lamp when the man rose with a catlike swiftness. He went up the stairs.

"The jasper's eyeballs have probably been falling out waiting for me to walk in," Joe Rand told himself. Then he moved with that easy amble to the bar counter. But he didn't have to rouse the somnolent bar boss.

A secret signal had been passed. The drink wrangler with a false smile was up and waiting to hear what he'd have. The two men at the table rose and went out the front door quickly and furtively. The pair with the beers tried to act too nonchalant, forcing chuckles, but each had dropped a hand out of ight below the bar edge. And Dusty Joe could smell the gunslinger cut of them. They were either Gass' hands or the trigger slammers of one of the bunches Gunner Gass was going to join up with.

"Redeye. Best in the house. A double shot, please," Dusty Joe told the barkeep in his surprisingly soft voice. The voice that was like a velvet sheathe over the steel in his wire-tough frame. He removed his hat, banged the dust particles out of it on the bar. It revealed his dark red hair, identifying him beyond any smallest fraction of doubt. Then, after the drink was poured: "And Gunner Gass will pay for it."

The plump bartender's bleached eyebrows climbed his forehead. "Gass? A gent called Gass? Don't know as I know him. Don't know as he's been around here."

Dusty Joe put a match to the tailor-made cigaret in his mouth, then

squirted smoke arrogantly full into the gent's face. "Then you're even dumber than you look! And that's a heap. Gass is around here somewheres. You tell him I'm here."

The barkeep swallowed, paling. "I'll ask around. Mebbe somebody knows him." He moved off.

"And you forgot to ask who I am," Dusty Joe flung. The barkeep went pinkly crimson then as he realized the giveaway he had made. Rand gestured casually toward the pair up the bar with the beers. "You might tell them, if they got lucky trigger fingers and any ideas, to figure which one'll get hurt first. Because at least one of them will." The lawman picked up his drink. "That's my way, mebbe you've heard. When trouble starts with me around, somebody always gets hurt." He laughed a little, ugily.

IT WAS TRUE enough. He'd been in more than a good score of gun ruckuses with the odds tilted against him. But, inevitably, when the smoke cleared, other men were down, some with tickets to Boothill. And Dusty Joe Rand, who seemed to bear a charmed life, was boss of the picture, seldom seriously hurt. Thinking of that, the two at the end of the bar looked as if they'd have been delighted to find holes in the floor.

But the fat discomfited barkeep didn't have to hunt far. He was just at the end of the counter when the woman's voice from the balcony said huskily, "Hello, Joe...Long time no see." And she started down the stairs, a high-bosomed girl with an incredibly thin waist and an indolent way of moving. Yet it seemed merely a sheathe to hide some fierce hot strength deeper inside her. She had a hollow-cheeked face, not beautiful. But above the scarleted mouth, below the blue-black hair, were the arresting yellowish eyes, heavily-lidded. She smoothed the maroon dancehall hostess dress she wore, smiled with one side of the very red mouth.

Swivelling half away from the bar, Dusty Joe muttered, "My Gawd, Judy!" And the rocklike bleakness of the face was gone for a moment. An almost boyish look of leaping hope replaced it. Then, as he paled around the lips he tongued, the face froze. Judy. Like a ghost out of his past. Judy at a hacienda once years back down outside Nocozari..Judy laughing at him later in *The Cactus Palace* where she'd been singing...Telling him she was the daughter of an outlaw, that she wanted no part of a John Law. That she meant to marry a wealthy brand owner and throwing that ring of his on the floor. Judy and the bitter thoughts she evoked during long nights on a lonely trail.

Dusty Joe had never expected to see her again, had hoped, as well, never to. But here she was, in this town bossed by Gunner Gass. In the place where Gunner Gass was. Dusty Joe tongued out his quirly and had a grip on himself. First of all, he must never forget his mission here. He nodded a little, cut his eyes quickly about the big room. His mission came first.

IT WAS PECULIAR. The Law had no charge against Gunner Gass, one-time deputy sheriff, a deadly gunman, rustler, outlaw, alleged killer. He had done his time in the Big House for that shooting affair at Yarba, been released scot-free. They knew Gass, smart, shrewd, a plotter, was dangerous; suspected his hand in other affairs but never had been able to build up proof. Then word had come along the grapevine that the recently-freed Gass was going back into business outside the Law. He was going to unite three lobo outfits of the Border, head them himself. Smuggling on a wholesale scale would doubtlessly be their game.

The suave, smart Gass was the one man who could have brought the three outfits together. The one with the brains to lead them. It was a bad situation, promising much; it had to be checkmated. And Dusty Joe, because he knew the Gunner—had jumped him twice and brought him in only to have courts free him had been assigned the task of stopping Gass in his new move. It was tricky. After all, he had no right, no basis on which to arrest him.

Dusty Joe thought of these things as Judy came across the dancefloor toward him. Gass wasn't simply wicked with a gun. He had power, men to protect him, men who'd shoot for him. And Gunner Gass had a reputation for never making a move without planning it over carefully in advance.

"Hello, Joe," Judy said as she neared. The smile wavered on her lips, voice catching. Pallid spots appeared on her cheeks. "You fool, why did you have to ride in? You'll never beat Gunner when he's dealing the cards in his own place!"

"Howdy, Miss Judy," Joe Rand said easily, one hand near his hat on the bar. He brushed at dust on the black coat he'd unbuttoned earlier. "You sure look mighty pretty—like always. How've things been going?"

One of her slim arms darted out as she cast a quick glance over her shoulder. She pushed him slightly. "Joe, it's that crazy pride of yours. Get out while you can still climb in a saddle. Gunner Gass has taken over this town, lock, stock, and barrel. Ride, Joe."

His narrowing eyes hardened and he shook his head a notch from side to side. "Somebody has to stop him. I aim to...Gunner sent you down to talk me out of it, lady? Or to trap me?"

THE YELLOW eyes flickered with sparks of anger. It was like it had been before, like down in Mexico, in the *Cactus Palace* at Big Squaw. There was something electric between them, and outpouring. He was conscious of that perfume from the black hair, of every curve of the body she never could seem to keep quite immobile.

"Joe—if you still care anything about me—go," she pleaded.

It almost happened then. She held the old magic for him. He started to reach for her, then saw the slight movement down at the back end of the bar, around the corner of it. The man's head. Dusty Joe's draw with the left hand was casual, easy, like a man plucking something from a pocket. But terribly swift. His hogleg crackled. A splinter was ripped from the end of the bar counter and the man there jumped back. Then Judy swept her body over as a shield before the lawman, facing out to the room.

"Hold it—everybody!" Gunner Gass emerged from the shadows up on the balcony. A fiercer gust of wind buffetted the place, making the ramshackle building creak. He saw now it couldn't be done. "Pen the hog legs!" he ordered his men, including a fourth one who moved up behind a post over in the other back corner.

Dusty Joe felt himself shake a little inside. It could have been bad. Killed in a gun melee over a woman, a woman known to be his old flame. Gass would never have been brought into the picture at all.

"Come on upstairs, Rand," Gass called down.

Dusty Joe touched Judy quickly on the arm as he passed. That gesture of hers had shown him where she stood, anyway.

HE WENT UP the stairs for the showdown. Down a corridor to where a door stood open on a lighted room, drawn guns swinging in his hands. Half a step inside the office, he froze, cutting his eyes to the tall bald gunslinger to one side. From behind the desk, Gass told the man to get out. He left and Dusty Joe heeled the heavy door shut behind him. The pair of old feudist faced each other.

Gass was no taller than the lean Rand, but with a broad block of body over a square of face. He was swarthy with a shock of black hair. He had his hands crossed over the hair now as he leaned back in the chair behind the desk. Tremendously thick lips pursed, he smiled mockingly, said in his heavy slow voice:

"You see, Rand, we want no trouble. You see that." With one hand he gestured toward the fact his shell belt with its guns hung on a wall hook behind him. "No, no trouble. And you can't kill an unarmed man, can you?"

Dusty Joe gave him back a hard grin. Ice Frozen over a rock couldn't have been any harder than that grin.

The terrible resolution about him charged the air. "Yes, I see, Gass. But I'm here, and I'm going to do what I came for."

Gass shook his head, not even bothering with any denials or protest of innocence. "There is no charge against me now. What can you do?" His body shook with silent laughter.

"You aren't going to form those three outlaw outfits into a new Border bunch, Gass! Hell, man, you'll set the Rio afire. That Sam Slavin is a danged killer coyote. Once get him started with you behind 'em and all that power—" Dusty Joe shook his head. "You ain't a-going to do it, Gass."

Gass plucked up a half-smoked cigar with a large hairy hand. "I have certain business plans. Catch me in something illegal—*catch* me—and then you can act, Rand."

"I've never failed on a mission—never failed to get what I went out after, Gass." There was a knife in the lawman's voice now.

"There's always a first time," Gass chopped off.

"You aren't going out of this hole, Gass, till I get your promise." That was a strange thing about Gunner Gass. And the thing that gave him such power on the owlhoot, that made it possible for him to weld together three such rival bitter-hating outfits as he planned. His word was inexorable law to him. Never once in his career had he broken it.

Gass looked at the gun Dusty Joe had levered up, then smirked. "A two-bit bluff, Rand, and you know it," he said evenly. "Shoot me and you'd never get out of this place. Slavin's trigger slammers are at every door. More of 'em outside."

"But *you* don't want to die, Gass. . ."

Gass shook his head. "And you with your pride as a paragon of the Law wouldn't want to stand trial for murder. Kill me and it would be murder. I'm not wanted, and I'm unarmed."

DUSTY JOE felt the skin tauten over his cheek-bones. Gass sat up over the desk. "Now it's *my* turn to make the threats. . . Joe!" he called to the bald gunman outside the door. "Send in Ebby."

There was a long pause. Then a little furtive-faced man with thinning hair and spectacles shuffled in. Gass drawled, "Pueblo City—'bout twelve-thirteen years back. Rainy night. There was a holdup of the dancehall. Three men, wasn't it Ebby? And what was your job at the dance place, Ebby?"

Dusty Joe, with a second look at this Ebby, knew the answer before it came. Recognized him. This Ebby had been the bartender there. It had been before Joe Rand became a John Law to work his way up to the Governor's staff. He'd been desperate, down on his luck. And these two others had the idea to hit the dancing place.

The attempt had been a failure. Plenty of shooting. Joe himself had caught lead in his leg and dragged himself out a side door. Just as he had his mask had slipped off and there had been that little bartender huddled like a jackrabbit behind an overturned table. They'd looked into each others' faces. And now here was the jasper to confront him again.

"You saw one of the holdup gents, Ebby," Gass went on with unhurried relish. "Ever see him again?"

Ebby bobbed his head, looked at Dusty Joe, then jerked a thumb at him. "Looking at him now, Gunner."

"All right. Get the hell out." Ebby retreated with a sly smile and the door shut behind him. Gass smiled widely, thick lips wet. "All right, Joe Rand. Now why the hell don't you put your boot in your hand and get the hell home and forget about me? And then—I'll let you alone."

Dusty Joe had the answer then to Gunner Gass' placid defiance, to why he had let him come all the way into this hole that was his head-quarters so easily. Gass had a whip to crack, and the temptation to act on his suggestion was almost overpowering. To put it down as just a tough break that this had had to float up out of a wild forgotten past. To tell his superiors he had been unable to track down Gass.

Then he remembered that girl,

Judy, downstairs. She believed in him, in his adamant integrity. If he walked out now, as Gass, suggested, she would know. Stiffening, Dusty Joe studied the gloating Gass.

"Thank me for letting you walk out, Joe," Gass said. "And get going! I'm sick of the sight of you!

DUSTY JOE thought of drilling him. But it would be as good as signing his own death warrant—only worse than dying. He'd never get out of this honky tonk; then he'd be turned over to the Law on that charge out of his past. His pride in himself as a badge packer just simply couldn't stand that.

The wind caused the lamp on the wall bracket to gutter. And from the tail of his eye Dusty Joe saw its rays flicker off metal. The key of the door behind him. Reaching back he twisted the key in the lock.

"What the hell are you doing? Hey!" Gass cried.

Joe Rand smiled though his eyes were frostier than ever. He began to unbuckle his gunbelt after placing his hat carefully over on a chair. "Don't try to grab for the hardware on the hook behind you, Gunner." Removing the belt after holstering his guns, he dropped it carefully in a corner. As he peeled out of the black coat, Gass, eye cocked, came out of the chair. He started to speak.

"Gass," Dusty Joe answered him in advance, "I can't get out. But nobody can get in either now—not fast. And now we're going to find out how much nerve you pack. Better get shed of your coat!"

Gunner Gass got the idea. He smacked his lips and yanked off the gray coat fast. This, confident of winning, he liked. He had beaten more than a couple of men unconscious with his heavy fists. He came around the desk with a catlike quickness. half, crouched. They circled. Gass' right hand smacked off Dusty Joe's cheek. And they were at it.

Gass, teeth bared in a half grin, struck again; but Dusty Joe's head wasn't there. Then the John Law's left was smacking into the lobo's face like a pole end. Their boots stomped up dust from the floor. Their breathing became spasmodic grunting after both men had landed heavily to the head again. Dusty Joe smashed him twice in the body.

Gass fell back against the desk but only to catapult himself away from it, and his boot caught the lawman in the belly. Dusty Joe just grabbed it in time to break the full force but tottered in agony. And Gass was in on him, swarming over him, gouging, grabbing at hair, landing with an elbow on the side of the skull. They smashed to the floor, the slighter badge packer beneath. But he thrust up with spiking fingers and caught Gass in his left eye.

ROARING with pain of the jabbed eyeball, it was Gass' turn to stagger back. Slowly, battered, Dusty Joe climbed to his feet. He licked at the blood on his lips. Somebody thumped on the door. Gass told the man outside to get the hell away and charged in. Dusty Joe measured him with a righthand smash like the blow of the poleaxe; Gass caromed off a wall and went down rolling.

But when Dusty Joe dived to pin him, Gass knocked out two of his teeth with the upward thrust of a bootheel. Then Gass grabbed him by his shirt and dragged him down. They thrashed around on the floor. Gass gouged the lawman in the leg with one of his spurs, but Dusty Joe got a knee into his stomach. Gass succeeded in twisting him over and whammed him against the desk.

A couple of moments later. They swayed on their feet at opposite sides of the room, bloody, panting, but neither man broken. They met in the center of it, pistoning with both arms. It was back to the primal, scarcely a step above the fang-and-claw tactics of the jungle. The punching went on for minutes. Once when they fell against each other. Gass did sink teeth into Dusty Joe's ear. The latter butted the gunman in the chest, but crashed head-down into the wall when he bulled on past him.

Then the Rio gunman stretched Joe on the floor with a blow to the

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TRAIL TO TORMENT

By Laurence Donovan

They figured that Injuns were spiriting away those valuable horses from the wagon train, but Ezra Dume knew better.

HE OWNED the only sorrel, the only tailed coonskin cap and the only bright, blue bandannas in all that mixed wagon train. He had been named Ezra Dume. At 22 he had the trail-aged face of 30 and the hard, mature wisdom of a man in his forties, having cut his baby teeth as a prisoner of the Cheyennes.

All of this gave his angular face a cynical humor when he smiled, which should have warned Blake Ames, his wagon pardner, Ames was older and held a wide rep with his latest Sam Colts six of these later 1850's, and his point-weighted skinning knife. It was an oversight of Blake Ames not to mark how Dume's gray eyes could suddenly become slits, even while his sardonic smile would remain fixed.

The pardners scaled off at about the same weight, even off at six feet each, and both now with weather burned faces, which they kept shaved clean back to their long hair, a Nordic blond for Dume and perhaps Injun-breed black for Ames.

The pardnership was temporary. Ezra Dume needed a skinner for one of his two Conestogas of gold camp trade goods. Blake Ames was looking for wagon train safety from Independence to the latest of Colorado gold boom camps, reputed to be a hell roaring discovery which some said Horace Greeley himself had given the odd name of *Torment*.

The wagon train included some of the first fine Morgan horses to come

west from Kentucky. These were kept well up in the train by Silas Harden, their owners. All of the army posts were profitable markets for the hardy saddle stock. Harden had six riding guards with the Morgans.

Come now to the other big attraction of the Silas Harden drive, one for which most men would have traded all of the Morgans. Her name was Mantha Harden, a girl with the looks and spirit to flirt with the younger men of the train with the freedom held by the older women to be outrageous for that day and time.

Hand it to Mantha Harden that she had such depth and smartness that the quiet, cynical Ezra Dume was her choice. So in the first weeks of the long trail from the Missouri river, Mantha became openly pledged to Dume.

THUS IT was as dawn came this morning over the misty hogbacks of the Rockies along the South Platte, that the train had but a day or so ahead to the root-tooting town of Torment. And, awakened by some trail instinct, Dume was scanning the nearby breaks with unusual interest.

What he saw then, just before the sun splashed the eastern towers of the Rockies, appeared to leave him no choice. He was faced by the necessity of either exposing or killing his pardner, Blake Ames.

For out there, riding stealthily into camp on Dume's sorrel horse, wearing Dume's conspicuous coonskin cap and a blue bandanna, was Ames. Dume reached a conclusion, as others in the wagon train must come to it, that Blake Ames was a horse thief and a renegade who had been whittling away at the Harden herd of Morgans, causing the Kentucky horses to disappear in small numbers for the past two weeks.

Indian raiders, missed by the sentinels, had been blamed. No more than three or four of the well guarded Morgans would be missing each time. But one of those Morgans would fetch from $200 to better than $1,000, depending upon the beast and place of sale.

Jim Bonnet, boss of the Morgans guards, had declared none but Injuns could get inside and snake the horses out. Ezra Dume disliked Bonnet, he could not have said why. Maybe it was the rider's dash of Eastern manner, his good looks argumented by keen, black eyes with a carefully trimmed mustache to match.

Or more likely, and not so intangible, was Bonnet's presence in the Harden camp and Dume's having seen Mantha riding and talking with the flashy fellow, apart from the others. Perhaps it hadn't been suspected by Silas Harden or Jim Bonnet, but Dume had been too long among the Cheyennes to think of any of the red men as systematic enough to plan such cautious thievery.

A quick raid, if any were wearing war paint, the stealing of many horses and killing, Dume could understand.

FROM THE first, Dume had told Mantha, "My Injun brothers ain't wantin' such fancy stock as the Morgans. Nary hoss thieves but white renegades with the trust of some army men or rich strike gold campers would view them Morgans as a bargain. Injuns would grab more an' rougher beats."

Dume didn't say all then that he thought, all that had come to a sudden, unexpected exposure by something that had delayed Blake Ames and brought him riding late, to an early sunup, into camp. And riding in on Dume's own marked sorrel, a perfect figure of Dume at even a short distance.

"Be it so," said Dume grimly during the following minutes. "It's too late for ary but what's the truth. It'll have to be a quick shoot-out now or a bigger split that'll bust up the wagon train when we'll need every good eye and gun as we come nigh the gold diggin"s and the boom town so tough that the great Greeley named it Torment."

Dume's hard, bitter thought had become inescapable. For one other wagon camper, putting the quickest solution of the Morgan stealing up to him more than to any other, had by chance ridden up along the train at this clearing hour of dawn.

Mantha Harden, on a pinto pony, was a picture of grace that always thrilled the solemn minded, cynical Ezra Dume. She had topped a rise, apparently having in mind to breakfast in the Dume and Ames camp, as she sometimes did since they were pledged.

"Of all things to happen," ground out Dume between his teeth. "Mantha seen that snaky devil Ames, an' the way she pulled back sudden' fore he had a glimpse of her, she's opinin' it's me. . This morning Jim Bonnet'll be reportin' a few more Morgans missin'."

DUME MIGHT have hailed Mantha then. But he'd been brought up by wily, old Chief Red Hawk of the Cheyennes, until he was fifteen. Then that wise old warrior had given Dume a pony and sent him out to join up with palefaces of the light hair, of his own kind.

In the few past days Dume had noticed that his sorrel saddler, although hitch free beside his wagon was easily fagged out. This explained it.

Mantha had pulled from view on her pinto. Dume was back in his wagon bunk, face stoical, seeming still asleep as Ames furtively put his coonskin cap and a blue bandanna back in place. Dume waited until Ames was unbooted, wrapped in his blankets before he stirred.

When Dume was apparently awakened a few minutes later by the too gay voice of Mantha, he replied and appeared rubbing his eyes. The usually vivid girl eyed him gravely. But she laughed then, too falsely for Dume to mistake her real feeling.

"I'm hungry for flapjacks an' sage hen eggs you run onto yesterday, Ezra," she said lightly. "Not many wagoneers sleep half the day. Look-it that sun, half an hour up."

Dume yawned realistically, and pulled a crooked grin as his gray eyes were slitted toward the offending sun. But he noticed that Mantha's gaze took in his sorrel, now rope staked, but with the white lather of recent hard riding on its red hide.

BLAKE AMES came out and talked with brisk heartiness while they ate browned flapjacks and sage hen eggs. There was nothing of weariness marking Ames of evidence of having lost any sleep.

Mantha was putting on an act of gaiety that was too forced. Dume spoke little, but he noticed that Ames had his Colts gun belted on and the shaft of his deadly throwing knife showed above its leather holster under his left armpit.

There was a tenseness in Dume that he concealed. Mantha's own cheerfulness was too gay for so early in the morning. Ames' dark face showed an easy smile of carefree humor.

Judging the distance, Dume knew Mantha had not ridden all the way back to the Harden horse camp after she had spotted the rider she must have believed to be him, coming in from the night.

Like a flashing signal of Injun smoke, the talk came up along the wagons being hitched for the day.

"Six Harden Morgans was tooken off by the Injuns last night," called out an Illinois wagoneer camped next below Dume. "By gravy! They're gittin' bolder! You'd think some renegade in the camp is gittin' them hosses out!"

Dume replied on sudden impulse, "Figger it's Injuns! Nobody in the camp could be sly enough to haze them Morgans out 'less there was connivin' with one or more of Jim Bonnet's guards!"

Dume's innards went empty at the angry flush his words brought to Mantha's smooth, lovely throat and face. Dark eyes blazed to meet the mockery of quizzical gray ones.

"If I was you, Ezra Dume, I wouldn't—" Mantha stopped her verbal explosion, getting to her feet. "I'll be gettin' back," she supplied quickly. "Pa'll be havin' cat fits! That'll make thirty of the Morgans gone. Every dollar pa had was out into bringin' them to what he hoped would be a big profit market."

Dume was giving her his hand for a foot lift to her pony.

Mantha's dropped low words that were like snowflakes chilling Dume's

spine.

"I thought your open hostility to Jim Bonnet was on account of me, Ezra. But now I know different, and I'm sorry I come ridin' to breakfast. Goodbye, Ezra."

Dust swirled from the pinto's hooves and she was gone.

"SEEM YOUR gal's leanin' away from you, Ezra," stated Ames as Dume doused out the breakfast fire."

If Ames was expecting a sudden break, he was disappointed. All Dume said was "Uh, huh." Then he added, "I'm wonderin' if my hoss has been eatin' jimpson weed or somethin'. He ain't showin' any spirit of late. Reckon I'll hafta doctor him some."

All that time Dume had his slitted gray eyes cornered upon how his breed complexioned pardner kept his hands hovering close to his Colts and knife. Dume turned his back and went about hitching up his four tough mules.

It had come to him he intended to do some doctoring this day, but if he succeeded it would benefit the sorrel gelding indirectly.

Dume's wagon was leading. The wheel he had tampered with during a short stop came off at the exact spot he had selected. This was at the crossing of a shallow, sandy-banked creek on the trail to Torment.

He called back to Blake Ames.

"Hold up, Ames! I'll need a lift fixin' this wheel! We'll haul up that flat sand shore out of the way!"

The following wagoneers volunteered help, but Dume said it was nothing to fix. The other wagons rolled on. He had figured the Silas Harden wagons half a mile back, and it was nigh time to make the dinner hour stop.

Before Dume had the job figured out, no more wagons were moving.

"We'll be needin' a couple-a tough poles for jacking up the load to slip that wheel, Ames," said Dume, "But we'll have a bait of noon grub up by that spring. I'll take the stuff. Bring along the axe."

DUME'S drowsiness after washing down some venison jerky and cold biscuits, communicated itself to Ames. He had been without his sleep the night before, Dume was sure.

Before time for any other wagon to show below, Dume arose, picked up the axe and grumbled, "Might as well be choppin' them poles or we'll be taggin' the whole train."

Ames got up, stretched, and relaxed. Dume tested the edge of the axe with his thumb. And from that position he suddenly took one long catlike stride.

Ames had a gun swift's speed going for his gun. But the hickory axe handle clunked with a hollow sound over his ear. Within five minutes Dume had his pardner tied tightly and gagged with one of his blue bandannas. He carried the limp Blake Ames and covered him with loose trade goods in the front of his own wagon.

Listening for the first sound of moving wagons, Dume shoveled sand and patted it into a mound like a grave. He had finished and his wagons concealed the grave as the first wagons crossed the creek after dinner. Dume dropped one of his blue bandannas near the grave.

The mules having worked off their morning freshness, he tied the leaders of the second wagon to follow his own Conestoga. It was slow going but the second four-mule team plodded along without giving trouble.

"It'll be only a few minutes before the Hardens come to that creek," said Dume with a hard grin. "It's one pool that's big enough to water the Morgans, so they'll hold up there. Mantha and some of the Morgan riders will see that bandanna. I'd best be lookin' after the hardware."

He had taken Ames' Colts and he cross-belted it with his old Navy gun. He shouldn't have overlooked that razor-edged throwing knife of the hard and tricky Ames.

WITHIN half an hour Dume heard the fast hammering or running horses.

"Here comes hell on a platter," he

murmured. "Maybe it'd be best to meet em where I got leg room."

Dume pushed his long legs off the wagon seat and hit the ground. He was facing Silas Harden, Jim Bonnet and two of his riders, and Mantha.

"Come visitin', folks?" inquired Dume calmly. "I'm not fixed much on gettin' up a bait o' grub right now."

Jim Bonnet clipped out speech angrily under his mustache.

"Hear this mornin' you do a bit of night ridin', Dume."

"Ease on it, Bonnet," said grizzled Silas Harden. "Know why we're here, Dume?"

"Maybe you suspected Blake Ames' sudden demise, Harden," said Dume easily. "He's been ailin' some time, but didn't know it."

Harden's tone was icy. "Knowed you was raised Injun tough, Dume. But murderin' and funnin' about it. Aint you cold blooded?"

Mantha spoke up then. "I didn't say a word about this morning, Ezra. Jim Bonnet's the one said he saw you."

DUME breathed a gusty sigh of relief.

"Button your tongue, Mantha!" ordered Harden. "I was likin' you a heap. Where'd you sell them Morgans boy?"

Dume sized up the two riders with Bonnet. One was a hard one with two guns, name of Ross. The other was a Mex called Ramos who was rubbing a knife along the side of one boot.

Dume hadn't filled his hands, but the two guns were forward and low.

"There's a demand for Morgans anywhere there's army posts,' said Dume. "Some brass buttons don't care what renegades they buy from."

"It don't go, Dume," said Jim Bonnet. "Mantha, you was up to Dume's camp for breakfast this morning. You couldn't miss seein' Dume ridin' in at daylight."

"All I saw was flapjacks and eggs after I rousted Ezra from his wagon bunk," stated Mantha.

"But you've knowed Dume was runnin' off Morgans at night, Mantha?" blazed Jim Bonnet. "You'v been moonnight ridin' with him, too."

"We've been moonlight ridin'," admitted the girl calmly.

"Figgerin' you'd hitch up with Dume, you'd rob your own dad, you lyin' hellion!" raved Bonnet, his hands touching his guns.

"Ain't ary duded up hired hand calls my gal names!" roared Silas Harden, and his big hands yanked a shotgun from a saddle sheath.

MANTHA'S loyalty was more than Dume had expected. Then his careless slouch was broken. Ramos, the Mex, was fast, his knife streakin' at Dume's throat. Dume twisted and one ear was sliced. Ramos had his gun out as if it were greased.

The hands of Ross were a blur as both guns came out. But Dume's hands didn't seem to move much. Smoky flame belched from his hips. The Mex doubled over and rolled to the ground.

Ross couldn't so much as scream with buckshot tearing across his face. Jim Bonnet held up one hand.

"Maybe we've got this wrongful, Dume," he hurried to say. "Could be a mistake. You comin' in all lathered up on your sorrel this morning looked bad."

Mantha's voice was hard now. "None of you saw Ezra or the sorrel but me, and I didn't say a word. I left it up to you and dad, Jim Bonnet, after we found that grave."

"Blake Ames ain't dead whatever," grinned Dume. "I've got him tied up and 'fore I'm through with him he'll name every buyer of them stolen Morgans."

Bonnet said, "Think we're damn' fools, Dume. We seen where you buried Ames up that creek."

"Go dig up the body, Bonnet," advised Dume. "And while you're doin' it, me an' Silas Harden will have a talk with Blake Ames—"

"Ezra, look out, behind you!" Mantha screamed.

Dume had sense enough to duck as he turned. Blake Ames had cut himself free. His hand was already drawn to bury his knife in Dume.

"You're askin' for the other barrel o' this shotgun, Ames!"

That was Silas Harden and buckshot at that distance could make an awful scatterment of a man's features.

"What we're wantin' from you is the name of them passin' the Morgans to you, where you sold 'em!"

Blake Ames let the knife drop from his hand. Jim Bonnet shot point-blank at Ames with his righthand gun. Dume's old single shot pistol flamed as it came from its holster. Bonnet's gunhand turned to a bloody mess.

Bonnet swerved his horse with his left hand and kicked in the steel. Dume started to use the other gun, the Colts.

"Let him go, son," said Silas Harden. "Two dead men and one empty grave is enough."

It was only then that Dume realized one bullet fired by the dead Ramos had ripped his side. He was suddenly so dizzy he thought it a good idea to sit down.

Mantha was down, tearing away his shirt, fussing around.

"Reckon, son, you'd best hold up your wagons an' haul off trail right here. You ain't fitten to drive and I'll send a man back as soon as I git the Morgans to Torment, and give Ames his choice of namin' his renegade friends or tanglin' with boom town justice."

Mantha Harden's vivid face lighted with a smile.

"Tell you what, pa, you'd best ride lickety-split ahead into the town. And don't wast no time, 'cause I have to stay here to nurse and cook for Ezra. It'll be scandalous if you don't get a marryin' justice out here along with a doctor."

Silas Harden scowled and grinned at the same time.

"Take a word o' advice, son," he said to Dume. "If you aim to lead a peaceful life, don't try raisin' either gals or hosses."

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North out of Texas

By Edward Price

The kid only knew one way of dealing with people . . .

THE SNOW flogged him on, but he was willing, yes, and anxious to go. The hard white stuff, like sparks struck from an anvil in the sky by an unseen hammer, flailed him and his mount and his lead horse cruelly; but it also rapidly filled in the dragging hoof-marks, piling up on a trail that law men, hours back, had found was run-out.

His small body, wracked with consumption, and hate of all men, was now possessed by great shudders brought on by relief from fear of what was behind him, and the fear of what lay ahead. Even so, he halted his horses and turned in the saddle to look back on a country he could never ride over again. This was at the brow of a small hill: whether he had actually crossed the border did not enter his mind. Only, somehow, he felt right then that the very air, snow-filled, had changed from civilized security to a greater lawlessness than he himself had; it was bigger than his own individual deadliness; here was a gate swinging wide to peril. It took in him and his kind, giving no quarter to the weak, giving a begrudging existence to the ones who could survive. There was ahead of him, he knew, uncounted miles of outlaw freedom to those who could want so much to live as to endure it. In all that space ahead of him there was no white man's town, no thing that was not wild.

The norther brought all its brutal force down on him, slanted the sharp snow on his young face; he turned toward it, bowed to it, heading into that bad land, urging his tiring horses into that wide, wild country. Give the Kid this much credit, right there: he felt he'd rather die than turn back.

The looming buildings shook him; his reckoning had figured nothing but emptiness for a long way ahead. It was late afternoon, now, and for some hours he had held the thought that he would be dead of cold before morning. But there they were, big barn, corrals, and beyond these the ranch house. He came up to it silently, as the snow and the wind's howl allowed him to, and indifferently left the mounts under the open-fronted tool shed: they were grateful for this half-shelter and muzzled the ground for wisps of trod fodder left by other animals before them.

Murray, grotesque in the long sheepskin coat of a man now dead, stamped up and down, beat his arms to life. He spat out his juiceless cud of tobacco, unbuttoning, and gazed at the low building across the way. There was no light there, no smoke, nor in the bunk house; the place look deserted; he could see no life in it. The Kid threw his coat flaps back, gave his gun belt a hitch; he touched his iron, taking courage from it. Here we go again, he thought.

Acting like any waddy might, he blustered into the kitchen, hollering, "Anybody to home?" He called again, in his thin, high voice, and then muttered, "Anyways, I'll eat." The kind of man he was, he was not grateful to anyone for leaving the white hell outside; crossing to the pantry, he took down a can of beans; early yesterday his stomach had known food, not since then. Hanging on a ceiling hook in the back shed was a strip of fat-back. Just as he unslung it, his warming body told

his tired brain that where there is heat, is fire, that life had been here lately, might still be here. He cursed his dumbness and went back to the kitchen in his swift crab-crawl. When Murray heard the voice, he wheeled as swiftly as he ever had, with the long blue barrel pointing surely at that voice.

A SPLIT second from firing, the tenseness left him. In the doorway was a very old man in a wheel chair, a harmless old cripple with a blanket covering withered legs, a senile-looking old man just barely keeping his last foot out of the grave. He quavered, "Findin' something to eat boy? I been dozing."

The Kid slung back his pistol and said, "Yeah." He began to slice the bacon; then the silence got him. "You alone, pop?"

"My grandson an' the hands got holed up at the camp, looks like," the old man said. "Bertie, that's his wife, got a call from a neighbor that's birthing, before this norther came down. Time being, yes, I'm alone. But there's no stock here, right now, and I can take care of myself." His watery eyes watched the Kid hack open the can of beans with a kitchen knife. His voice was weak and mild as he said, "The way you brought that gun out I don't like. You better eat up and get out, bub. We're close to the line but we don't shelter trouble."

Kid Murray didn't look up from turning the sizzling bacon. "Look, old man. I make my own comings an' goings. Nobody tells me."

"You wouldn't be coming out of Texas, this way," the old man pointed out, "an' in this weather, of your own doing."

This was a terrible stab into the boy's crazed egotism, but he no longer bothered answering; in his mind, he had decided the old man was the same as dead. To himself, aloud, shovelling the food onto a plate, he muttered, "I'll hole up here until it lets up. It's bad outside."

The old man agreed. "An' it won't break before morning. Still, I can't see anything else for it but you to move on when you're through." He seemed to have the foolhardiness of a man who knew he was very close to the grave and did not care how he went there. "I know your kind," he said, suddenly, "and it's just no good. The whole answer's right in your eyes, even to not bein' able to help bein' what you are."

The food choked Murray at that, but before he did anything else he wanted to stoke his frail body.

The cripple went on, "I am eighty years old, an' my last twenty have been spent in this chair. I have had two sons die, one sudden an' the other in bed, both honorable deaths. All I can say I should hate to have bred you."

Now the Kid, riled into speaking, said, not boasting too vainly, "Look, if I had notched my gun for every man I killed, there would be no butt left. When this norther breaks, I'll leave. If your folks get here before then, they will get a surprise. At that, they will, anyways."

The old man answered gravely, "I know what you mean. As I say, I have seen your kind. Between here and Canada, boy, there is a bullet waiting for you. You will keep moving on, from one bad time to another until you meet that bullet."

Murray pushed back from the table; it was time to obey that old, cold urgency to kill. He brought the gun out with indifferent slowness, holding it as though it were part of him, which, in a way, it was.

The old man was speaking his last words. "I'll talk it out with you for a minute. Just supposing I got a gun under here." Then Murray noticed his hands were under the blanket and the old eyes were steady.

"You have like hell," Murray said, calling him a name. "If you had, why didn't you trigger it before?"

"Boy," the old man's voice was chiding, "didn't you ever know people who live by other rules than you've made?"

MURRAY STUDIED that shapeless small bulk under the blanket that was the old man's hands; the old man was watching Murray's face. His voice went on, gently, relentlessly, "No, you never have, I suppose. Just get your shot in first, no matter how, and get out. Well, shoot an' get out, then. I have had a good, long life, and it's about over, now. You're what?—twenty? Now, I might have a bullet to give before I go, and I might get it in before I go, and I might get it in before you give me yours, or as soon. For me, it don't matter. For you—a gut wound, say; that's bad; you take time to die. Say a busted shoulder, and where are you? Or supposin', just supposin' it's your gun hand, your wrist?" The Kid drew a quick, rasping breath.

The old man's voice was now a sinile crooning. "It would be nice to be twenty again, like you, with all the life you'll live till you meet that bullet I spoke of. It might be years away. Well, why don't you shoot, boy, why don't you? Maybe you'll die with the kind of quick violence you'd want. But maybe—"

The Kid's breath was labored, but his eyes began to film. The old man said, quickly, sharply, "Watch, then, boy. I got time with my dyin' breath to pull a trigger."

"Show it, then," Murray said, hoarsely, almost pleadingly. "Show me you got it, an' we'll figure out a new spread."

That implacable old man said, "Mister, you drew your cards when you drew that gun. Make up your mind, now."

"Just gimme until th' norther breaks—"

"You had your feed. Move on! Shoot or move on!"

All this time, the norther was increasing in roaring violence that was heard by both of them in the silence of the deadlock. His belly was warm and his thin blood was warm, and they cried out to his brain at leaving this shelter, this warmth. But the unknown that lay ahead was not as fearful as what might happen to him in this kitchen at the hidden hands of this commonplace old man who did not mind dying. The Kid choked on a sob as he struggled into the filthy sheepskin that covered his skinny body to his ankles.

The old man wheeled and faced the door that Murray closed behind him, moving the chair with little sounds of pain. he stayed there in the darkness long after the last light of day died, long after the Kid and his mount and his lead horse had been blotted out in the slanting snow.

He had rested his hands tenderly on the blanket, old man's hands, stiff and swollen-knuckled cupped claws, empty palms upward.

THE END

(Continued From Page 84)

jaw preceded by a low foul one. Gass spat out part of a broken tooth and tried to grin as he leaned on the desk. That ought to do it; no man before had ever risen to resume the fight when he hit like that.

But Dusty Joe Rand did somehow push himself erect. He looked like a drunken scarecrow of a man, swaying, features a butchered mess. When Gass rushed him again, though, he drilled his hands into the Gunner relentlessly. Then Gass landed another of those bone-splintering swings. Dusty Joe fell against the chair, head wobbling. Gass wanted to get to him, to stomp him with his boots, but he couldn't move straight enough. And once more, Dusty Joe came to hands and knees, up off the hands, onto one knee and hitting as Gass wavered in.

It was Gunner Gass who was driven back then. Dusty Joe was on his feet, moving forward slowly but relentlessly. Gass' nerve broke against this hombre who wouldn't stay down. On hands and knees, he snaked around the corner of the desk, straightened at the other side of it, clawed for the gunbelt on the wall hook. Dusty Joe stopped. He reached down to his hat on the chair.

"Don't!" he barked. Gunner fumbled at the gun in the holster, handicapped by the blood-drenched eye. There was the whiplash crack of a gun. The bullet bit into the wall beside Gass and he dropped the belt, twisted around like a cornered animal. Across the room Dusty Joe stood with the smoking snub-barrelled .32 he had rigged in the crown of the hat.

Slowly he dragged himself to the desk, put down the gun and sombrero, started for Gunner Gass once again, hands balled. "This time, I—I'm putting the boots to you, Gunner," he mumbled out.

Gunner cracked wide open, confidence blasted. This lawman was like something inexorable. something beyond human power. Sheer panic pulled his fist-smeared mouth loose and sagging, put a bleat in his voice.

"All right—all right, Joe. I promise. You got my word."

Dusty Joe halted. "You swear not to organize this Rio bunch—to get the hell clear of the state. Gunner?" He lifted a fist, cocked it.

After a moment, Gunner Gass nodded. "I swear that, Joe."

DUSTY JOE sagged down on the desk, slowly picked up his gun as if it weighed a ton as men hammered at the door. "All right, Gunner...I—I think we'll both need a drink. And then—then you'll escort me safely out."

Gunner Gass' word was still good. In a little while, in the chill of evening, Dusty Joe rode away up the trail toward Old Injun Pass. The sand storm had blown itself out. It was still now with bright stars starting to dapple the blue sky overhead. He fingered his battered face gingerly.

"The man could fight though," he admitted.

"I still think you were a fool to come into his place and alone for a payoff showdown," Judy said in the saddle of a bay mare beside him. But when he looked over at her, the yellowish eyes shone with admiration.

He looked further back over his shoulder at the plaza of the town behind in the soft light of evening. The restless gray eyes tightened as he reined up. Slowly he reached inside his coat, unpinned the badge of a special State officer. Then with a soft oath, he flung it back toward the town.

"You're quitting the Law?" Judy cried.

He nodded. It hurt some. "It wouldn't be fair to keep riding for it," he said hoarsely, driven by that rigid code of his. "I—I owe it a debt, and I'd be weakening it. You see—I'd be giving certain men a chance to feel the Law, it wasn't perfect, beyond all question, clean." It was hard for him to put. He meant about Ebby the bartender and what he knew. He turned ahead again, picked up the reins.

Then he looked at Judy, reached out and slung an arm about her waist. He'd gotten his woman back, anyway, a woman he'd never won before...

The rustler was hurled backward by the bullet.

Locoed Gunsmoke

By Cliff Campbell

Old Lafe Slater's plans were loco enough, but his redheaded daughter had still more loco schemes and it all added up to a trigger showdown.

LAFE SALTER had one foot in the boothill of bankruptcy and his other toehold was slipping. He had only his own stubbornness to blame for what was fast verging upon double disaster. It was reported that old Lafe admitted he had been mistaken but once in his life. That was when, in the wildness of youth, he had married.

The redheaded girl child born of that union was today, in old Lafe's cantankerous mind, half of the trouble that galled his sleepless nights. Old Lafe was too contrary to admit he was at fault for Julie turning out the way she had.

When Julie was no more than a freckle-faced, long-legged brat in her late teens she had cottoned some to a younger buckaroo of old Lafe's rich Bar-H. Old Lafe had rawhided the cowpoke off his spread and shipped the romancing Julie back East for four years of the best finishing school for gals all of the dinero for a year's prime beef would buy.

While Julie was being polished off with an education that old Lafe intended to "cure her" of any such notion as throwing herself away upon some drifing cowhand—the same old Lafe had been when he made the error of getting hitched to her mother—other trouble descended upon the Bar-H. This was also looped up with the stubborness that rode the boss of the big beef and horse ranch all the harder as he grew older.

Old Lafe had found the Great Canyon meadow up beyond the pass known as Cougar Gulch the best sheltered grazing for the annual crop of foaling Morgans. This resulted in the adjacent badlands suddenly becoming infested with rustlers. Three straight years of heavy losses hadn't shaken old Lafe's determination to graze his finest Morgans in Great Canyon meadow.

This chilly spring morning he was saying in effect, "My Bar-H is the toughest beef and hoss spread in the whole damn' state of Colorado. Try and bust it." His decision to ignore the advice of Bill Lake, who had ramrodded the Bar-H since Julie was a brat who would ride any calf she could catch up, came of a change in his own ideas as to what man he would pick out for her to marry.

When he had busted up Julie's first teen age romance, old Lafe had been prideful of the way his Bar-H crew showed off to Bearclaw Valley, with the finest riding gear and town-going duds. Then Julie had come home. Four years of the East was proving what a western heiress should become, from the angle of those taking her dinero.

Redheaded Julie had been transformed into something old Lafe didn't believe was quite human. She had taken up right off with a newcomer, a foreigner, a downright dude and, as old Lafe viewed it, a hifalutin' fortune hunter who had optioned some good graze land and announced he was planning to breed palominos, all with an eye upon Julie and the rich Bar-H she was supposed to inherit.

This latest apparent suitor for redheaded Julie further rubbed old Lafe wrong by taking such a monicker as Richley Wells-Crowley, the last connected. He didn't speak English, in range lingo.

As this came about old Lafe reversed his notion of how the Bar-H should be rodded. He pleasured himself in showing what a long-spurred rooster he could be. To hell with what Bearclaw Valley neighbors might think.

Added to Julie's having turned so uppity she called grizzled Bill Lake and the cowhands "mister," raids on the Morgans grazed in Great Canyon meadow had been extended to cut into Bar-H beef, made up to the meatiest whitefaced cattle ever brought west of the Platte.

Old Lafe, against Bill Lake's openly profane advice, changed his riding outfit to hire as riders the roughest and toughest who saddle bummed that way.

"Golrammit, Bill!" insisted the cross-grained old warthog. "We'll sure roust out that Cougar Gulch wild bunch if we have to pay gun wages. We've gone soft here in Bearclaw Valley."

Bill Lake had a long jaw and a buttoned mouth. Wool wasn't pulled over his eyes when they were open. He found himself ramrodding an outfit that was a disgrace to the valley.

"This saddle tramp outfit may be fitten to fight rustlers, but the cantankerous old walrus started takin' 'em on a couple-a months back when Julie come home," said Bill Lake to himself. "It smells skunk and it's aimed at fendin' off Julie's dudish notions, hittin' mostly at our new hoss raisin' neighbor with the last name connected."

NIGH NOON over the sunny Bearclaw Valley one of the newest and most disreputable saddle drifters, Johnny Deane, awoke after a night guard snooze. His levis and his shirt were patched, but under these rags he had wide shoulders and lean hips. With a two-week beard that left only his dark eyes and blunt nose in view, Johnny had but one redeeming feature.

He had a cornering, white-toothed grin that wouldn't rub off. He had saddled the toughest buckskin roper in the big barn, when his quick, quiet efficiency with his battered horse gear got unexpected results.

Old Lafe and Bill Lake were making mad medicine talk over in a box stall. Having got Bill Lake's grudging permission for a few days off, Johnny Deane had been ready to ride. What he was hearing was directly in line with a pasear he was planning into the *malpais* beyond Great Canyon meadow and Cougar Gulch, so he let the buckskin go on munching from its manger.

Old Lafe's voice was flint hard through his yellowed teeth.

"Like I said, Bill them three hundred or more of the Morgans foalin' mares must be shove through Cougar Gulch into Great Canyon meadow right after sundown," whanged old Lafe. "Take only the usual hands to ride guard. I've been schemin' me a scheme. If there's ary rustlers around they wouldn't be warned or thinkin' of a raid the first night. I'm baitin' a trap an' don't tell me I ain't grazin' Great Canyon like as always."

Johnny Deane chewed reflectively on a straw. He edged near where he could see old Lafe and the stocky, long-time ramrod of the Bar-H. Bill Lake was staring at the boss as if he was plumb sure he was out of his mind.

"Maybe your damfool order to start a drive of our best market beef to Goldtop tomorrow with the market down to bottom, and wantin' one of them no-good saddle bums roddin' the herd is part of your scheme, boss?" Bill Lake's voice was low but hard. "Sure as sin, we'll lose most o' them Morgans mares if we don't show sense and pass up Great Canyon meadow this season. As for the prime beef, the price won't pay up Bar-H notes."

"Let me do the worritin', Bill." Old Lafe's tone rasped. "I've gotta have cash to meet the payroll. The Bar-H has always pulled through bad years."

"Yup, you're danged nigh the edge to schum up schemes," came back Bill Lake bitingly. "An' which o' them tumbleweeds would you trust with runnin' all the meat off your white-faces, boss?"

"There's Rake Parnell or Jammer Olsen or—maybe that lazy Johnny Deane," said old Lafe. "But double the trail crew. That's where my secret-minded scheme comes in. But I ain't lettin' ary son know ontil you've hazed them Morgans through Cougar Gulch."

Bill Lake's voice was dry with sarcasm.

"Maybe it'll have to be Parnell or Olsen, on account of me givin' Johnny Deane a few days for a pasear into the hills, fishin', I guess."

Johnny scrooched his head between his shoulders as old Lafe proved that listeners mostly catch hell.

"Just as well if that Johnny Deane would keep on driftin'," snapped old Lafe. "I ain't trustin' him none. Seen him shinin' up to Julie an' that dang-whanged foreign hoss raiser with the double-jointed name. Come to me it's damn' funny Julie would palaver with such a polecat, 'less him an' Wells-Crowley is cookin' somethin'. Takin' a few days, huh? Maybe so Deane'll be fishin' with the wild bunch that's been plagin' us."

Johnny hadn't known the Bar-H boss had seen him making talk with Julie and he muttered. "I've been gettin' damn' careless. I'll have to warn her to be on guard."

AT THAT Johnny stopped thinking about himself. He had seen the straw colored hair of Jammer Olsen on the other side of the barn. In his time on the Bar-H, Johnny had noted that where you found Olsen, it was likely Rake Parnell, and another thin-lipped gunhand, Scar Raner, would be right close.

Johnny's cornered grin tightened. During his time on the Bar-H, Johnny had put his own brand upon Olsen, Parnell and Raner.

Young Slim Doyle had gone in cahoots with Johnny in trailing Olsen, Parnell and Raner to direct contact with the wild bunch holed up

in the Perdition badlands south of Great Canyon meadow. It was apparent to Johnny that old Lafe's careless hiring of tough drifters would include some hardcases.

Take the case of Johnny Deane. With darkened hair and always two weeks from a shave, old Lafe hadn't inquired into his back trail. A buckaroo of eighteen can change a heap in four years. It was remarkable how well Johnny knew all of the trails all the way from Bearclaw Valley over to hellish Perdition hills.

Johnny saw Jammer Olsen duck from sight and vanish. It was a good guess that Olsen had heard plenty and he wouldn't be around to ramrod a beef drive to Goldtop the following day.

"Look boss," and Bill Lake's voice was desperate. "If you're only raisin' cash an' puttin on a bluff on account of Julie, why risk losin' everything?"

Old Lafe was like powder exploding.

"If Julie'd come home from that prissy school with a few fancy cuss words and maybe been in a scrape or two, a man could grin and bear it. But golrammit she goes around wearin' perfume, an' she rides to the neighbors in skimpy duds that's a shame to the nation!"

"You can't head off a fortune hunter, if it's so this Wells-Crowley is such, by losin' the Bar-H," stated Bill Lake. "An' I ain't so sure you're guessin' right. I'd be funny as hell if that young buckaroo you chased when you sent Julie to school was a heap smarter than you thought."

Johnny lost his grin a minute and wondered if Bill Lake had seen him come into the barn? Then he sent his eyes searching the draw below the Bar-H corral, thinking Jammer Olsen might be high-tailing out that way. Johnny took his mind off old Lafe and Bill Lake for a minute. He missed seeing Olsen but he saw Rake Parnell and "Scar" Raner, both hard-lipped gunslicks.

Scar Raner was the most dangerous. He could throw a knife from a neck sheath faster than the average gunnie could draw. Now he saw Parnell and Raner deer walking their horses along a winding arroyo toward Cougar Gulch. There was a reason.

Slim Doyle, the sunniest kid horse gentler Johnny had ever met up with, topped a Morgan colt on the higher trail leading to Cougar Gulch.

"Them damn' slicks is trailin' Slim," whispered Johnny. "It means they're wise to me an' Slim tryin' to find the hide-out of them rustlers."

IF JOHNNY hadn't his own notion of trapping the wild bunch, with old Lafe's foaling Morgans as bait, he'd have cut loose with his .44 and rousted Parnell and Raner. Then he decided Slim Doyle was smart enough to watch his back trail.

Also redheaded Julie suddenly rode across the creek bridge. As usual Richley Wells-Crowley, in fancy duds, was with her. As they would have ridden to the saddle barn, Johnny slipped to the door and wig-wagged one hand with his thumb to his ear.

Oddly enough the lovely Julie blew a kiss off her fingertips at the disreputable drifter. At the same time Bill Lake had put a saw edge on his usually smooth temper.

"You won't have hide or hair of hoss or beef on the Bar-H, if you keep on schemin'," said Bill Lake gruffly. "You've gone clean out of your mind?"

Johnny held up, waiting, sure Slim Doyle could look out for his own hide. For which reasoning Johnny was going to hate himself the rest of his life.

Replying to Bill Lake, old Lafe yelled, "Great jehosiphat! Jake Shaver's holdin' my notes, an' he ain't foreclosin' as long as I'm kingpin of Bearclaw. He dassen't! But it'd serve that skunk cabbage smellin', half-naked, redheaded gal of mine right if I sold the hosses an' beef an' sheeped out the whole damn' Bar-H!"

Old Lafe was puling fiercely at the ragged end of his white mustache.

"That's what I'd call cuttin' off your own nose, you sun-warped old

galoot, if your nose wasn't nothing but a bronc-busted smidgin!' Now Bill Lake was yelling. "If you're thinkin' the Bar-H is due to be grabbed by some locoed ranahan that ain't no more sense than to hitch up with a redheaded gal what's likewise heired her dad's jackass mind, I'd be lookin' for that half-wit closer to home."

"This 'ere Wells-*spit*-Crowley would hitch up with a Piute squaw to grab the Bar-H!" howled old Lafe. "Wears a boiled shirt for supper on weeks days an' miscalls it dinner! You see that them Morgans move down Cougar Gulch an' that beef is gathered for the drive to Goldtop. I'm payin' gun wages, an' when Wells-*spit*-Crowley sees gunsmoke an' blood he'll tuck his tail an' never fetch in them palominoshe he ain't done nothin' but wag his tongue about!"

Knowing that Richley Wells-Crowley could have heard this if he had been a mile down the crrek instead of just riding up to the saddle barn, Johnny grinned wickedly up at the reddening face of the Bar-H neighbor. At the same time redheaded Julie tilted her nose and winked openly at Johnny.

Inside the barn Bill Lake's sawtoothed voice exclaimed, "It's your say-so, Lafe, an' I ain't never went agin an order in thirty years. I'll drive the Morgans to Great Canyon Meadow but that scheme you say you've schum had better be hell-fired hot or we'll all be lookin' for new pegs to hang out hats!"

"Bah!" exploded old Lafe, making it sound like the wail of a starving sheep.

JOHNNY Deane forked his tough bucksin. He heeled the beast close to redheaded Julie, as if by accident. He let strange words slide from the corner of his mouth.

"Maybe Bill Lake'll think to hole up them Morgans in Geyser Canyon this side o' Great Canyon meadow. Me an' Slim Doyle will be scoutin' that way. This ain't no time to give old Lafe reason for more cussin'. He'll find out about us soon enough."

Julie's blue eyes appeared to scorn this ragged tramp rider, but her whisper was something else.

"Bust them rustlers, an' save the Morgans, Johnny. I'm just a redheaded gal to dad, but a Morgan hoss is worth a killin' any day. I'm sidin' you, honey."

It was peculiar that Richley Wells-Crowley sort of grinned and rubbed his clipped mustache as Julie and the saddle bum buckaroo got their horses separated, and he had heard all they had said.

Old Lafe was still muttering that this Wells-Crowley couldn't buy his next winter's beans as he came from the barn, but he ended on a short ugly word when he saw them. Johnny gigged his buckskin away quickly, but not fast enough to miss Julie's suddenly rawhiding voice.

"Ah, there you are, father!" greeted the overdone, grown-up tomboy. "Richley's staying for lunch-eeon. I'm having Lee Pong concoct one of his delirious blueberry turnovers."

Old Lafe's snort told what he'd like to turn Julie over.

Johnny had the itch to reach the Cougar Gulch trail, but he heard Wells-Crowley drawl, "I say Mr. Salter, Juliet has indeed made me fairly ravenous, quite. I must persuade Lee Pong to furnish my man Walters with some of his recipes."

Johnny had to delay to pass around the corral. He tucked his head low. Old Lafe's greeting to Wells-Crowley was unprintable.

Old Lafe added, "You'll excuse me all to hell, *Mister* Wells-Crowley. I've gotta mosey over to the back medder to help some cows what's slow with their calvin'."

"Why father, dear!" exclaimed the irrepressible Julie.

But old Lafe strode over to the corral and hit the kak. He rode off with a vicious raking of his spurs.

Johnny had one quick look at Julie as he swung back past. Her cheeks appeared to blush but her eyes danced.

"Mr. Salter doesn't seem to be quite himself," said Wells-Crowley.

"Like hell he don't!" snapped Bill Lake. "Dammit, Johnny!" he yelled

then. "I'd oughtta held you for that beef gather!"

Johnny seemed suddenly deaf. Julie spurred suddenly after him.

"It'll about finish the Bar-H if the wild bunch hits our Morgans again,' she s'd. "Dad's set on them goin' to the Great Canyon meadow. Nab the rustlers, Johnny, and we're all set."

"What's to be done Slim Doyle an' me will try, honey," said Johnny tightly. "This is where a couple-a rannies can do more than a whole army in Cougar Gulch."

Bill Lake's lower jaw dropped when he saw Julie bend over and kiss Johnny's cheek. Then Johnny was hitting out down the creek, ignoring the ramrod's notion that he stay and help gather beef.

Johnny was heading to join up with Slim Doyle, pronto.

Bill Lake was cussing without pause as Johnny headed down the Bearclaw. The town of Brimstone lay over that way.

"All the fishin' he'll do will be over the bars," grunted Bill Lake. "Julie! If that tumbleweed cowpoke ever cut off his whiskers an' washed his face, would he look a mite like a younker who hired on under another monicker four, five years back?"

Julie closed her left eye-lid slowly at Bill Lake.

"You think I go 'round kissin' strange pilgrims, Bill?"

"Wouldn't su'prise me none whatever, Julie," growled Bill Lake. "When you gonna quit wearin' them silly ridin' pants, an' start actin' natural?"

"Good Goshen, Bill, you ain't wantin' me to be so downright natural as to stop wearin' pants?"

Julie flashed the dour ramrod a tomboyish grin that took him back to her calf riding days.

ALTHOUGH his saddle rigging was ill-kept and old, the shining butt of a new Winchester showed in Johnny's saddle scabbard. He pushed the buckskin hard to lose all view from the Bar-H ranch house. He had seen Jammer Olsen sending his black horse up the same arroyo along which Rake Parnell and Scar Raner had sneak trailed after Slim Doyle.

Johnny appeared setting out for the valley town of Brimstone. That was for the benefit of Bill Lake or any other tough hand who might by chance be watching.

"I guess we put the fat in the fire," said Johnny to the ears of the buckskin. "Maybe now he'll recollect I hired on about the time Julie come back from the East."

Johnny didn't intend riding far toward Brimstone. As he had a final glimpse before a dip in the trail hid him, he had marked Jammer Olsen picking up speed toward Cougar Gulch. Down the Brimstone trail apiece was a short and rough cutacross to the middle of Cougar Gulch.

Johnny wondered if Bill Lake had seen him riding out some at nights with Julie. But he judged old Lafe's ramrod was too much troubled by that order about the herd of Morgans to think about that.

Bill Lake would have trouble convincing three or four riders that a fortune in foaling Morgans was to be drifted through Cougar Gulch into the Great Canyon meadow again this year. Johnny bet with himself that Bill Lake would bust his own record and finally disobey old Lafe's order.

There was a pocket canyon ten miles along the gulch trail where the Morgans could be grazed. They could be brushed in or held by a couple of riders. But Jammer Olsen was riding with the word of old Lafe's stubborn order for tonight's drive. Johnny had some hope of cutting ahead and stopping the Bar-H renegade.

Johnny swore at himself for wasting time when he was in the shortcut to Cougar Gulch. The afternoon was well along and dusk was dropping. Slim Doyle had promised to meet him at a sweet waterhole in the gulch called Geyser Spring.

Johnny's beast was a steady-going roper and not easily spooked. But as he rounded a rock shoulder, wondering how he had missed seeing

Jammer Olsen, the horse snorted and shied.

Johnny was given no more warning than that. A rifle crashed from a stony hump not more than fifty yards away and lead spanged and whirled viciously from the smooth wall nearby. The lead had fanned Johnny's face and it had been the sudden rearing of the horse that had saved him.

Then he saw Jammer Olsen's bullish face jump up in the dry gulching hump and a rifle was straightened toward him at point-blank range. Johnny had no time for his Winchester and he was snatching out his .44, angered at his own carelessness. For the short gun was poor at that range and in a split second it seemed certain that either Johnny or his beast would be taking Olsen's lead.

"Drop, Johnny! Dammit!"

It was the clear voice of Slim Doyle, coming from the trail just ahead of him. And the kid bronc stomper was in the middle of the gulch only a few yards away, having jumped into view on foot from behind the rocky shoulder.

Johnny's action in throwing himself from his saddle was instinctive, but he cut loose in Olsen's direction with his short gun as he half jumped, half fell. It seemed to him then that the explosions of three guns blended into one.

Jammer Olsen's bullet went wild. The broad-faced gulcher fell forward, his body twitching some. Then as he landed with a jolt in the trail, Johnny saw that a smoking rifle in the hands of Slim Doyle had busted up Olsen's aim just in time.

Puzzling over Slim Doyle being dismounted at this spot, Johnny pulled himself up, one hand snagged onto the reins of the panicked beast. He saw then that the Geyser Spring was just ahead, which accounted for Slim Doyle becoming a sudden lifesaver.

Even in the tenseness of this moment, Slim Doyle had sunny, smiling eyes looking over his death gun. It was the last time Johnny Deane was ever to see that smile.

PARNELL and Raner must have jumped their horses into the trail from a standing start where they had been bushed up, hiding. When Johnny saw the pair of killers rushing upon Slim Doyle from the rear, he yelled a warning and slammed two shots from his .44.

Handicapped as he was by hanging onto the prancing horse it was almost miraculous that Johnny planted a throat-ripping bullet under Rake Parnell's chin. Within two seconds Johnny was swearing at himself for not having picked off Scar Raner.

Parnell had been shooting wildly, but there was a flash of flying light from the hand of Scar Raner. Johnny didn't have much chance to look, and he thanked the gods he didn't quite see all of it, missing some of the horror by turning his .44 upon Raner.

His shot missed and his stubborn horse knocked him from his feet before he had a second chance. Next thing he knew, Scar Raner pivoted his fast beast, leaving the dead Rake Parnell in the trail as he headed back toward the Perdition badlands some six or eight miles away.

Johnny ripped out oaths that mixed up with blinding tears as he at last came around and got over to Slim Doyle. The kid bronc stomper's smile was buried in trail dust and Johnny was glad he could not see Slim's face.

That heavy, keen-pointed throwing knife of Scar Raner had split the spinal cord of Slim Doyle at the base of his brain. The kid had never known what hit him, if there could be any satisfaction in that.

Johnny pulled Slim's body to one side of the trail quickly. Raner had hammered away. The tough roper could not match the speed of the good Morgan horse Raner was riding, but that wasn't keeping Johnny from hitting the killer's trail.

Having seen Jammer Olsen fall, body twitching with the Slim Doyle bullet that had saved his life, Johnny had no room for other thought than to track down Scar Raner and cut him to pieces. He bared his head,

looking down at the dead Slim Doyle, and put one foot in the stirrup.

Something pounded the back of Johnny's skull high up with the force of a club. It was a bullet from the rifle of Jammer Olsen. Only stunned, Olsen came up now, mounted, gave one satisfied grin at the bloody furrow in the back of Johnny's head and took out to catch up with Scar Raner.

It appeared to Olsen as if Johnny's skull had been cleanly busted, and the rustler rider of the Bar-H wasn't wasting time. Olsen's own head was gouged where Slim Doyle's shot had knocked him out.

Johnny awoke in the chilly, early night darkness of Cougar Gulch. His headache was a lifetime record. He was minutes recollecting everything, then minutes more carefully protecting Slim Doyle's body with loose stones against night varmints.

Johnny's horse was grazing alongside Geyser Gulch spring.

"Nope. Bill Lake ain't made the Morgan drive yet or he'd have come onto us," Johnny decided. "But Olsen heard enough to have that wild bunch all set for it and—"

A sudden thought hit Johnny then.

"The rustlers won't be waitin' to let them young Morgan Mares be hazed into the Great Canyon meadow where they'd maybe never pick 'em all up," he thought. "If Olsen passes along old Lafe's dumb scheme, they'll feel safe enough in gulchin' the few Bar-H riders and makin' a straight drive for the state line."

Johnny could see the first steel-cut stars above the gulch. Then he heard the rumble of moving Morgans. Dammit! He had counted on Slim Doyle and him being enough to head off the fortune in young mares and turning them into the one pocket canyon in Geyser Gulch.

"Dammit!" he muttered. "Julie an' me hadn't ary right to figure on rousting out the rustlers setting us square with old Lafe. An' with old Lafe countin' on the Morgans being safe bait in Great Canyon until he springs a trap on the wild bunch tomorrow night, I'm alone between that well known hell an' the deep blue."

IT WAS scarcely seconds later that Johnny knew he had spoken the grim truth. For he heard riders coming at a lope from the direction of the Perditions. He knew he was right in between and he had to waste time to move Slim Doyle's body up among the rocks to make sure the corpse would not be trampled by a probable stampede.

Slim and he had estimated there were fifteen to twenty long riders waiting word from Olsen, Parnell and Raner. Only Olsen and Raner had gone through, but with old Lafe's stubborn order Bill Lake wouldn't have a chance if caught in Cougar Gulch.

Unwarned, Bill Lake wouldn't have more than a pair of riders at point in the narrow gulch.

The increasing thunder echoing from the gulch walls proved the young Morgans were moving fast, and the slightest alarm would spook them into a bolting stampede. With the thunder of the herd filling the narrow gap, Johnny made a desperate choice.

If he had been no more than a ragged drifter, he could have saved himself by gigging his buckskin up back of Geyser Spring. Then Johnny thought of the watered pocket canyon still a mile or more away toward the Perditions.

Like as not the rustlers themselves would check the Morgans and hold the herd boxed in long enough to quiet the half-wild, young mares for a trail drive through one of the many badlands trails. Knowing the ruthlessness of Olsen and Raner as opposed to Bill Lake's loyalty and honesty, the killers would see to it that the Bar-H ramrod and outnumbered riders didn't leave Cougar Gulch alive.

"With what Olsen heard old Lafe soundin' off with today the raiders would feel safe to swing the Morgans and dry gulch Bill Lake and his boys," thought Johnny. "If they toted off the carcasses how could Lafe Salter ever be sure that this own tough hired hands hadn't taken the mares an' put Bill Lake where even the buzzards couldn't find him?"

Pounding hoof thunder indicated the Morgans were not more than half a mile up the gulch. They would crowd the narrow trail. When he could no longer hear the Perdition wild bunch, Johnny figured the rustlers must have set themselves to turn the mares into the pocket canyon.

"I s'pose old Lafe planned to start a gun-slingin' bunch with that beef drive to Goldtop, then cut them back to bush the rustlers in Great Canyon tomorrow night," worried Johnny. "Not knowin' Olsen heard him tellin' Bill Lake about it. I'm kind-a young to do die," he added his cornered grin bitter. "But here goes."

The buckskin fought the bit when Johnny loaded on enough hardware to outfit a posse. He had his own new Winchester and the rifle off Slim Doyle. Two pairs of short gun belts were strung from the saddle gear and Johnny's slim middle.

Only the running Morgans diminished the metallic clatter as Johnny rode straight toward the Perdition raiders. The Morgans were gaining, but the buckskin put all he had left into a mad run. The tough roper was almost upon the rustler bunch before Johnny spotted the killers. He had almost missed the narrow gap of the pocket canyon, and might have jammed straight into the raiders if one of the rustlers hadn't started shooting.

JOHNNY hauled up, swerved to one side, and then he was down in a bunch of broken rocks at the mouth of the canyon turn. He couldn't count the number of thieving riders that broke toward him suddenly, their gun flame spreading red fire all the way across the narrow gulch.

Johnny had slapped his horse into the canyon trail out of the gulch, and then he was lying flat with lead singing like a mad hive of bees off the rocks around him. Johnny worked one Winchester fast, cussing when a horse screamed with pain, and grinning when the next scream was human.

Thudding blows touched Johnny's shoulders, but his hands still worked and he rolled to another bunch of rocks at the canyon mouth as he opened with the other Winchester. The fast blazing of the rifles had the effect of checking the rustlers and pushing them to the sides of the main gulch.

Johnny guessed he had about the chance of a taller-legged rabbit in hell, for the two hundred-odd Morgans were coming down upon him in a roar of hammering hooves and sudden mad squeals of pain. At the same moment Johnny pulled a fast one.

He quit shooting with the rifles, as if he were a candidate for boot hill. With blood warming both arms, he wasn't so sure that wasn't true. But he had a .45 in each hand as he heard the hard voices of the cursing rustlers and saw the dark mass of the raiders as they started toward him in two bunches, keeping to the walls of Cougar Gulch.

"Figure them to a T, bigawd!" grunted Johnny, as he found he could still thumb both six-guns although his arms were growing numb. This fresh fusillade of the .45s brought a new burst of gunsmoke up the gulch.

Johnny swore bitterly then as he saw three or four of the Morgan stampede leaders go down, but it was the turn he had risked everything for. This was the hole card. Make the raiders' own guns turn the stampede.

Two things happened.

The surviving rustlers started to break back, seeing the rolling wave of bolting horses that filled the gulch. At the same time, Johnny put himself more squarely in danger of death.

The rain of lead from the rustlers might have turned the stampede into the pocket canyon, but Johnny made sure of it with the red flame of his last two loaded short guns. Once their leaders turned, the bulk of the herd swung into the gap.

Johnny scarcely realized when the remaining rustlers made their new attack, turning once more up Cougar gulch. But he did have a faint sense of knowing that Bar-H

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riders, probably headed by Bill Lake, had suddenly converted the gulch behind him into a singing hell of death against which the final few of the Olsen-Raner raiders broke and high-tailed for the badlands.

JOHNNY was trying to make himself known, but he discovered he couldn't get up off the ground. He was passing out, he was sure, when he could hear what sounded like Julie's voice.

Old Lafe's dudish daughter couldn't be here. Hell! Julie had promised she would be siding him. Old Lafe had to be told now.

The whiskey in his throat was good stuff, but there was no sense in pouring it into his nose and choking him.

After that, Johnny Deane, the drifter, did hear a strange order given to Bil Lake, and that really was in the voice of the girl Julie, only this lacked polish.

"Dammit, Bill, rustle your hocks, and when you get to the Bar-H tell that hard-shell dad o' mine that his redheaded gal is hitched up to Johnny Deane, the no-good, tumbleweed drifter that licked the whole danged lot o' Perdition rustlers an' saved his precious Morgans from being scattered to hell an' gone," stated Julie. "An' you can rub in the salt, Bill, by lettin' old Lafe chew somethin' he'd bragged he'd bust up. Johnny Deane is the same shiftless buckaroo he spent a whole year's dinero on, makin' dead sure of his tally by sendin' me off to school."

"It'll pleasure me a heap, Julie," drawled the slow voice of Bill Lake. "Only I knowed it the first time I seen Johnny make a small loop ropin' tie at calf brandin'. But what's this tie-up betwixt Johnny an' Richley Wells-Crowley?"

Another hell-fire swig of redeye kept Johnny from slipping out again.

"This'll scorch dad's warthog hide," said Julie solemnly. "But Johnny is the brother he had come over to pard up with him raisin' palominos. It'll sure 'nough raise old Lafe's hackles when he finds out Johnny's free an' easy at slingin' names. Wait'll dad hears he ain't more than a hoot and

a holler from bein' the grandsire to the baby of *Missus* Deane Wells-Crowley."

Johnny heard Bill Lake's low whistle. "An' Johnny with six hunks o' lead dug outta him, tryin' to slug Doc Simmons fore he got the job done," chuckled Bill Lake.

Johnny had his eyes half opened. He was in a four-poster bed in the fancy furnished shack of Richley Wells-Crowley. Julie was still priming Bill Lake to break the bad news to old Lafe.

"Brother Richley ain't as dude-minded as he talks," she told Bill Lake. "He went an' bought up that whole lot of Bar-H beef in the Goldtop drive at prices that won't pay for their hides in another six months."

Johnny let the whiskey fog him to sleep then.

MRS. DEANE Wells-Crowley and Johnny were on the porch of the old Bar-H ranch house several days later. Old Lafe pulled at his white mustache with a know-it-all smirk. Bill Lake had his mouth buttoned up tight.

Richley Wells-Crowley stroked his clipped mustache.

"I'll never know what inspired me to buy up all those Bar-H cows at Goldtop," he said without a hint of a smile. "Found out though from sister Juliet I'd blundered into a lucky bargain, me having the old Lazy-J place with more grass than I can stock before next year."

"What the dang-whanged hell!" twanged old Lafe. "I'll have Bill Lake in the hoosegow for that double deal in beef. Knowin' I owed notes to Jake Shaver, he was plannin' to grab off the Bar-H. Which makes him a plain damn' thief, ain't that hoss sense, Julie?"

Julie's nose tilted. "As *Missus* Deane Wells-Crowley, dad. Seems like Bill Lake was following your orders. Us Wells-Crowleys maybe have hoss sense as well as plain old fashioned guts. Seeing the Bar-H and the Lazy-J will some day be the

(Continued On Page 106)

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biggest hoss an' beef spread north of the Perdition, I'm figurin' Johnny might as well claim them Morgan foalin' mares he saved."

Old Lafe's mustache bristled. Under his breath he growled, "Me makin' two mistakes in my life, first marryin' a redheaded woman, an' now bein' gran'pa to somethin' to be named Wells-Crowley."

Bill Lake's iron hand gripped old Lafe's shoulder.

"From the brand that's showed on this Johnny Deane Wells-Crowley, boss, you'd best talk soft about that gunsmokin', hell-fire drifter. Now you can set back an' take it easy."

Old Lafe glared at Bill Lake.

"You think I wasn't knowin' all the time that Julie was hitched up to that Deane Wells—dammit—to Johnny?" rasped old Lafe. "You danged, slow-minded walloper, you think I didn't know all the time all about him bein' that young buckaroo an' you think I wasn't schemin' all the time to make it easy for them to throw the Bar-H and the Lazy-J together?

"Yup, boss," drawled Bill Lake. "You're damn' right that's just what I think." The ramrod grinned maliciously, "But I don't think it'd be fitten for any innocent, new born baby to be branded with such a name as Lafe Wells-Crowley."

THE REAL WEST

by El Amigo

WHEN THE band of masked highwaymen rode down out of the hills, thinking to ambush the stage-coach, the driver whiplashed his horses into a furious lather, and the coach rocked and swayed, at a terrific pace, leaving behind a cloud of dust that slowed up the bandits just enough to allow the passengers inside to pick them off one by one, with long rifles extending from the stage windows. The coach finally dashed into the little town of Broken Neck, with the driver panting heroically, and humorously requesting liquid refreshment. From the coach, a lovely girl stepped down, worriedly surveying the dust on her waist, and frantically tucking into place the one wisp of hair that escaped from her elaborate coiffure.

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The part about the girl is pretty

(Continued On Page 108)

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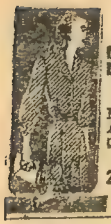

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 107)

obvious—but you wouldn't want to go to your neighborhood movie, and see her the way she really looked or acted after six days and nights in a coach equipped with every known variety of louse and vermin, nothing but cold water to wash in all the way, and not much time to use that. Certainly, the little lady has had no opportunity to change her clothing since she started on the trip, even if she was lucky enough to get her face clean somewhere. The fact of the matter is, she was probably hoping the bandits would stop the coach, just for the sheer pleasure of sitting still a few minutes without rocking. And though it is hardly delicate to mention it, if the lady resembled others of her generation, she may very well be feeling a little queasy at this point. The motion of a stage-coach in normal travel was frequently compared to that of a small ship at sea. When they really whipped it up—

Let's leave the lady out of it. She's had a bad enough time already. How about the heroic passengers, all eagle-eyed fellows, who can shoot with unerring marksmanship from a coach that is bouncing up and down only a little less rapidly than it is moving from side to side? Or the driver, who, in his position up in the boot, was so easy for a mounted man to pick off with a single shot, that he'd think twice or a couple more times before he decided the passengers' possessions were worth the risk? Being delicate again, we won't mention the fact that he most likely carried his liquid refreshment with him, and even odds, he was half-polluted before the whole thing started.

One other point before we leave the driver sitting in the boot. The coach wasn't his responsibility in the first place. Nobody would blame him for the loss of goods or lives anyhow, so why should he risk his own breath? The fact that he's usually seen seated all alone on top of that coach is probably because the fellow who was responsible, and should have been up there with him, was likely as not comfortably curled around the treasure chest at the driver's feet,

wrapped in his buffalo robe, and dead to the world.

THIS GENTLEMAN was known as the messenger, and the reason that he was probably asleep is that the company expected him to stay awake—for the full journey of almost a week, day and night. All the goods carried were under his care. It was up to him to see that nobody lost anything and everything got where it was going. He had to snatch his sleep by the hour or half-hour, and he was likely to do it whenever the stage hit what he considered to be a comparatively safe stretch.

The only trouble with that was that the aforementioned highwaymen, unless they were a lot dumber than they should have been, were likely to pick one of the stretches the messenger would consider safe to attack from. They were also likely to arrange things with the driver first, if they could possibly manage it—and they could manage it often enough so that those who didn't deserved to have the prize get away from them.

Hardly any stage robberies were attempted without some inside help. There was too much risk involved to make it worth the outlaws' time, unless they knew to the decimal point how much bullion the coach was carrying, and what their chances were of getting it.

In a number of well-known cases, the driver was tied in directly with the desperadoes. One robbery that was carried off successfully in Montana in 1865 indicates the somewhat-less-than-daredevil manner in which the outlaws were most likely to operate. The coach left Virginia City, heavily loaded with dust and gold, and with seven passengers who owned the treasure all set for trouble. Each man carried a shotgun, and they took turns sitting at the windows, ready for anything that came along.

There was a man with the driver up front. Probably the passengers thought he was the messenger.

If he was, he was carrying messages for the wrong side. At an isolated, wooded part of Port Neuf Canyon, as the carriage drove into a stand of willow trees, he suddenly called out,

(Continued On Page 110)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 109)

"Boys, here they are." The miners inside, realizing they'd driven into an ambush, fired on what looked like the gun barrels of the robbers, poking out between the trees.

Maybe the gunbarrels were decoys; maybe the passengers' aim wasn't too good. Whichever way it worked, it seems none of the bandits were hurt, but the answering volley killed five of the men, wounded another, and left only one untouched. He must have slipped out the back door, because he managed to escape through the bushes and work his way back to civilization.

With the passengers out of the way, the take was split eight ways—for six men besides the "messenger" and driver. The man whom the miners must have thought was a messenger had never been employed by the stage company at all. He was one of the outlaw band. The driver was in the pay of the company, but he had driven into the ambush on purpose. It was the last stage he ever drove. He quit his job, and managed to get from Salt Lake City as far as Denver before he was caught and strung up by the waters of Cherry Creek. None of the others were ever found.

That particular holdup is pretty typical, except in one respect: there generally wasn't any shooting, if the robbers could avoid it. Passengers were seldom harmed, unless they resisted as bitterly as these miners made it clear they intended to do.

MUCH MORE usual is the holdup described in a Deadwood newspaper in 1877. *"We have again to repeat the now hackneyed phrase, 'The stage has been robbed,'"* the editor reported bitterly. *"Four masked men took over the treasure box, robbed the passengers, and rifled their baggage, and after taking a drink all around and wishing the passengers and driver a pleasant journey, they packed their booty on their horses and started off at a loping gallop."*

In a case like that, the driver wasn't actually in with the desperadoes—but he knew which was more precious to him—his own skin or the passengers' possesions.

All of which doesn't mean that the stage-coach drivers of the old west were cowards or sissies. On the contrary, they were mostly pretty rugged characters, who knew how to stay alive in a bad spot, and how to keep their horses and passengers alive, too. As for the messengers, the company found out after a few years of experimentation, that human beings are not made to stay awake for six days running, and cut down the hours, so that messengers were changed as often as drivers, every thirty to fifty miles, and were able to stay awake through the trip.

Even if the hypothetical heroine we started out with didn't get robbed on her trip, she probably wasn't feeling nearly as good as she looks in the movies, when she ankled out of the coach. Among other things, it may have come as a bit of surprise to her when she changed from the railroad to the coach at Atchison, to find out that she could only take along twenty-five pounds of baggage. Any more would have to go by express. That usually meant unpacking trunks and suitcases to pick out the most needed things, and repacking again on the spot, which could just as easily be the station platform as anywhere else.

Afer she once got started with her selected bundles in her possession (and maybe in her lap, if the stage was crowded), she had to cope with the difficulties of sleeping, eating, and using up the time. The coaches went straight through, travelling by night as well as day. There was one, and only one, leaving each day, so that there was no way to stop overnight en route. If you stayed in a town to sleep, the next day's stage picked you up at the same time of day the last one left you. Patrons of the lines usually said that they were able to get some sleep after the first couple of days, even if the motion and the discomfort of sitting all the way kept them awake for a night or two.

Eating was as bad. The coach stopped twice a day for meals, which cost about a dollar apiece and consisted mainly of bacon, fat pork, beans, and weak tea or coffee. If you

(Continued On Page 112)

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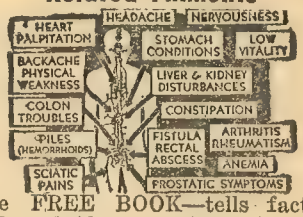

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 111)

were in the know, you had a supply of delicatessen on hand. If you weren't you just suffered. Once, on the prairie, when the driver was out of axlegrease, and a wheel stuck, a customer was able to produce a piece of cheese to get them moving again. The customer, however, probably regretted giving up his edible when he got to the next stop.

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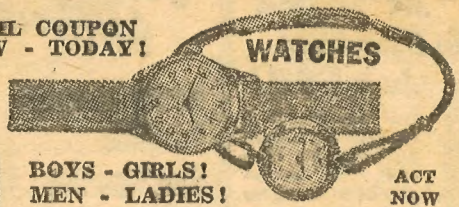

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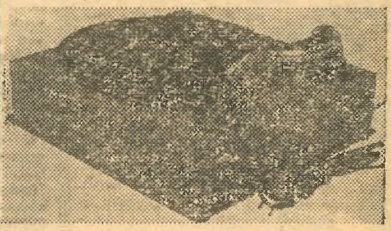

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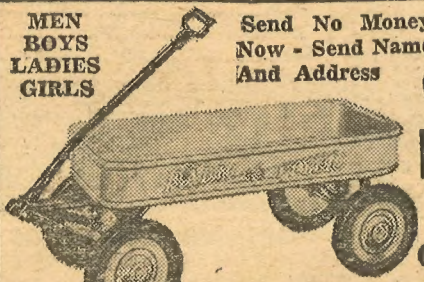

GIVEN PREMIUMS Or Cash Commission

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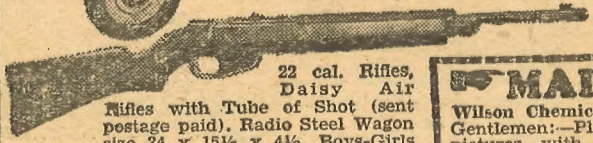

22 cal. Rifles, Daisy Air Rifles with Tube of Shot (sent postage paid). Radio Steel Wagon size 34 x 15½ x 4½, Boys-Girls Bicycles (sent express charges collect). Many other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. SIMPLY GIVE beautiful art pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for chaps and mild burns, easily sold to friends, neighbors, relatives at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit amount asked under Premium wanted in catalog sent with order to start. Be first! Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. T-87., Tyrone, Pa.

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Name ..... Age.....
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